



*Paul's  
Understanding of  
Jesus' Death*

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## **The Parting of the Gods**

Paul and the Redefinition of Judaism

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This selection from Chapter 3 of *The Parting of the Gods* argues that Paul regarded the sufferings and hardships he endured in his apostolic ministry as comparable to the sufferings and hardships endured by Jesus himself during his own ministry. In Paul's thought, what had led to Jesus' death was his commitment to bringing into existence the same type of community that constituted the objective of Paul's work as an apostle of Christ.

## SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST AND THE CROSS IN THE THOUGHT OF PAUL

Throughout his epistles, Paul repeatedly defines his objective in terms of bringing others to live under Christ as members of the community that looks to him as their Lord, that is, the *ekklēsia*. The content of his proclamation is not only the gospel of Christ and the word of Christ, but Christ himself.<sup>5</sup> He tells the Corinthians: “For I determined to know nothing among you except Christ crucified” (1 Cor 2:2; cf. 1:24). What he seeks to see confirmed among them is simply the “testimony concerning Christ” (1 Cor 1:6). Through his ministry the Corinthians have been “called into fellowship with [God’s] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor 1:9). At the outset of Romans, Paul claims to have been “set apart for the gospel of God,” which is also “the gospel concerning his Son” (Rom 1:1-3). The “word of faith” that he announces is that “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:8-9). In Gal 4:19, Paul speaks of being in labor until Christ is formed in the Galatians, while in 2 Cor 11:2 he writes that he betrothed the Corinthians to Christ by presenting them to Christ as a pure virgin. Paul also seeks to bring others to be clothed in Christ (Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27). In Phil 3:2-9, Paul contrasts the life he previously lived under the law alone with the life that is now his through Christ, claiming that all that he valued previously is loss and rubbish in comparison with knowing and gaining Christ so as to be found in him. Rather than seeking to bring people of other nations to form part of Israel and live under the Torah, then, Paul’s objective is that they come to live as Christ’s own as members of his body so that they may attain salvation and life through him.

To some extent, Paul regards all that God has done through Christ as salvific. This includes not only his coming into the world and the things that he taught in word and deed during his ministry, but also his ongoing activity on behalf of believers from heaven.<sup>6</sup> As the one who makes known

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5. See Rom 10:17; 16:25; 1 Cor 9:12; 1 Thess 3:12.

6. See Rom 7:24; 8:11-23, 34; 15:8; 1 Cor 7:10-11; 9:14; 2 Cor 13:3; Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 3:11-12. Following scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann, for a long time it was common to claim that Paul was either uninterested in Jesus’ teaching and ministry or unacquainted with it: “Jesus’ manner of life, his ministry, his personality, his character play no role at all; neither does Jesus’ message” (*Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel [New York: Scribner, 1951/1955], 1:294). In more recent times, however, scholars have increasingly come to question that view. See, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 189-95; David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 354-63, 380-92. On this discussion, see also Victor Paul Furnish, “The Jesus-Paul Debate: From Baur to Bultmann,” in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays*, ed. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, JSNTSup 137 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 17-50.

God's word and will in definitive fashion, Christ fulfills not only the functions associated with the prophets and teachers of Israel but also the role of the Torah itself. According to Paul, Christ himself is "the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). For Paul, Jesus is not merely a figure of past history but a living Lord who continues to be intimately involved in the life of believers and his *ekklēsia*.<sup>7</sup> Paul also ascribes a central role to Christ in the consummation of the salvation that is to come at the end.<sup>8</sup> As the Son of God descended from David and now exalted as Lord, Christ also fulfills the expectations associated with Israel's Messiah. According to Paul, he is establishing his reign now and will one day establish God's reign definitively by overcoming every other ruler, power, and authority and subjecting all things to God (1 Cor 15:24-28). Christ also fulfills the priestly function of interceding to God on behalf of God's people (Rom 8:34).

While all that God has done and continues to do through Christ contributes to the salvation of believers, in Paul's thought it is especially Christ's death that has made that salvation possible. Paul affirms that Jesus died for others and for their sins, tells his readers that they have been justified through Jesus' blood and reconciled to God through his death, and says that Christ has redeemed them from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them.<sup>9</sup> He also speaks of believers being dead and crucified together with Christ and repeatedly looks to the cross to define who believers are and how they are to live.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere in his epistles, however, does Paul ever offer any type of explanation as to the precise manner in which Jesus' death leads to the salvation of believers. In an attempt to supply the explanation that is lacking in those epistles, interpreters have looked to a number of ideas. Chief among these is the notion that in his death Christ endured in the place of sinful human beings the punishment or consequences to which they were subject on account of their sins, thereby delivering them from that punishment or those consequences. Interpreters have also attributed to Paul the idea that human beings are saved by participating in Christ and his death. This participation is often understood in a mystical, ontological, or "real" sense so as to claim that believers or human beings in general actually share in the

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7. On Paul's understanding of the ongoing presence and activity of the risen Jesus, see Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*, WUNT 2/323 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 147-54.

8. See Rom 2:16; 5:9-10; 11:26; 1 Cor 1:8; 11:26; 2 Cor 5:10; Phil 1:6; 3:20-21; 1 Thess 1:10; 3:13; 4:14; 5:23.

9. See Rom 4:25; 5:6-10, 18-19; 8:32; 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11; 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Gal 1:4; 2:20; 3:13; 1 Thess 5:9.

10. See Rom 6:3-11; 7:4-6; 1 Cor 1:17-18, 23-24; 2 Cor 4:10; 13:4; Gal 2:19-20; 5:11, 24; 6:12, 14, 17; Phil 2:1-8; 3:18.



very same sufferings and death that Christ endured when he was crucified.<sup>11</sup> Paul's allusions to the salvific significance of Jesus' death have also been understood on the basis of the *Christus Victor* idea, according to which Jesus has conquered powers such as sin, death, the devil, and the law by means of his death, thereby liberating human beings from those powers.<sup>12</sup> It is also common to claim that in Paul's thought the way in which Jesus' death saves others is by providing them with a pattern, example, or model for them to follow and imitate.<sup>13</sup>

All of these interpretations of Paul's thought regarding Jesus' death are problematic for many reasons. They raise many theological problems that seem to admit of no satisfactory solution. Among these problems is the claim that all human beings have been saved objectively by Jesus' death, yet are *not* actually saved by his death unless they come to faith in him. In that case, what ultimately saves human beings is their faith in Christ and his death rather than his death itself. Supposedly, Christ's death fulfills some requirement or condition that had previously made it impossible for human beings to be saved and forgiven by God simply by looking to him in faith and trust. If faith and trust in God had been sufficient for that salvation and forgiveness to be theirs, Christ would not have had to die. What has changed as a result of Christ's death, therefore, is that those who previously could *not* be saved by faith now *can* be saved by faith. Such an idea clearly seems to run contrary to Paul's thought, especially in passages such as Romans 4, where he speaks of Abraham being justified by faith long before Christ's coming.

Each of the different interpretations of Christ's death just mentioned also involves ascribing to Paul ideas and assumptions that are not only absent from his epistles but also run contrary to what we find in the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish literature. Nowhere in any of those writings do we find the idea that it was impossible for God to save human beings or forgive them their sins without the death of a sacrificial victim, and much less that of a human being who would take their place as their substitute. What God wanted from his people was not the suffering and

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11. See, for example, Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 101-49; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 497-508, 521-23. On the history of this interpretation of Paul, see especially L. Gregory Bloomquist, *The Function of Suffering in Philippians*, JSNTSup 78 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 35-49.

12. See Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: MacMillan, 1969), 63-73.

13. For a survey of these different interpretations of Paul's thought regarding Jesus' death, see Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 39-103.

death of an innocent victim but the practice of love, justice, and righteousness among all his people for their own sake. That alone could please him and put away his wrath.

Similarly, human beings were not thought to be in need of some representative savior figure to whom they might be united physically, mystically, ontologically, or in some other sense in order to be saved. Nor did they require that such a figure suffer and die so that they might come to participate in his suffering and death. Contrary to what many New Testament scholars have argued, nothing in Paul's epistles, the New Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, or Second Temple Jewish writings ever presents the human plight in such a manner. For Paul, the manner in which people come to live under the lordship of the crucified, risen, and exalted Christ is simply through faith in him rather than through some type of mysterious "transfer" effected by an actual participation in him and his death.<sup>14</sup> While human beings need to be liberated from powers such as sin, death, and the devil, neither God nor human beings were in need of the death of a Messiah or savior figure in order for such a liberation to take place. As the sovereign and all-powerful creator of the universe, God is free to overcome and destroy any power in heaven or on earth at any moment simply with a word. In order to raise the dead and bring about the redemption of all people and things, it was not necessary for God first to send his Son into the world and have him put to death on a cross so that human beings might participate in that death in some mysterious fashion in the present. Nowhere in Paul's epistles does he ever make such a claim. Similarly, while he certainly sees the love that Christ manifested in life and death as something that others are to imitate, Paul never claims that what human beings needed in order to be saved was that God send his Son and hand him over to the cross so that they might thereby be given a model, pattern, or example that they might subsequently reproduce in their own lives.

Common to all of these understandings of Christ's work is the idea that Christ's death fulfills some requirement or condition for human salvation that could be fulfilled in no other way. His crucifixion was therefore designed, staged, or engineered by God for the purpose of fulfilling that requirement or condition and thereby making it possible for God to do something that he could not do otherwise. Christ's death is seen as salvific by virtue of some type of "effect" that it produces upon God, the devil, evil powers, human nature, or human beings themselves. Such ideas represent assumptions that have no basis in the thought of Paul or in ancient Hebrew and Jewish beliefs regarding what needed to happen in order for human beings to be saved and redeemed from the plight to which they were subject. Instead, the human plight was understood in terms of the need for people

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14. Contra Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 453-73.

to be brought to live in ways that would enable them to experience the life, salvation, and wholeness that God desires for all.

In the thought of Paul, it is this that God accomplishes through Christ. Strictly speaking, however, it is not accomplished through Christ's death but through *all* that God has done and will continue to do in human history. While this saving activity is centered upon Christ and revolves around him as the one through whom God accomplishes his purposes, it is not only what God has done in Christ and his death that saves human beings. What God did prior to Christ's coming also contributes to their salvation, as does God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the present and his sending out of apostles into the world to establish the *ekklēsia* through the proclamation of the gospel.

A close look at Paul's epistles makes it clear that, rather than ascribing some type of salvific effect to Jesus' death or claiming that God planned and orchestrated Jesus' death so that it might accomplish some salvific purpose, he regards it as the *consequence* of God's efforts to bring human beings back to himself so that they might attain the life and wholeness he desires for all by living in conformity with his will. According to Paul, God did not send his Son to die but to be his instrument for bringing human beings to live in love, justice, righteousness, and freedom as his children for their own happiness and well-being. It was Jesus' dedication to that objective that led to his death, yet at the same time what made it possible for him to accomplish that objective was his willingness to give up his life in order to attain it. In Paul's thought, had Jesus sought to save his life rather than surrendering it in the face of the cross, that objective would never have been accomplished. The only sense in which it can rightly be said that God sent his Son to die is that he willed that his Son enter into a context in which his efforts to bring about the new reality that God desired to see would result in his death. Even though God knew ahead of time that his Son's dedication to the task of establishing the type of community that Paul describes in his epistles would lead to a violent death, God nevertheless chose to send his Son to carry out that task rather than holding him back. It is therefore *by means* of Jesus' death and blood—that is, his willingness to give up his life rather than seeking to save it—that God's saving purposes for human beings are now accomplished.

Of course, Paul never lays out explicitly in these terms his understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus' death. In reality, however, his epistles offer ample evidence that he interpreted Jesus' death in the manner just outlined. Paul repeatedly compares his own sufferings and the death or dying that he endures as a result of his work on behalf of the gospel to the suffering and death that Jesus himself endured. In fact, in many ways Paul

sees his own ministry as replicating that of Jesus himself.<sup>15</sup> By examining the passages in which Paul describes what he endures in his apostolic ministry and alludes to the suffering and death of Jesus himself, we can grasp quite clearly what Paul means when he affirms that Jesus gave his life for others and for their sins and says that believers have been redeemed, justified, and reconciled to God by means of Jesus' death or blood.

### *The Sufferings of Christ and Those of Paul*

Paul's most extensive comparison between his own ministry and sufferings and those of Jesus occurs in 2 Corinthians. There Paul offers a lengthy description and defense of his own ministry in favor of the gospel. As he does so, Paul repeatedly refers to his own afflictions and suffering. At the outset of the epistle, he even refers to the sufferings he and his co-workers endure as the "sufferings of Christ":

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any kind of affliction with the same consolation through which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. But if we are enduring afflictions, it is for your consolation and salvation; and if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you endure patiently the same sufferings that we too are suffering. And our hope for you is unwavering, for we know that, just as you share with us our sufferings, so also you share our consolation (2 Cor 1:3-7).

The general thrust of Paul's words here is very clear. He is speaking of the suffering, hardships, and afflictions that he and his co-workers endure as a result of their work on behalf of the gospel and saying that God comforts and consoles them in the midst of those sufferings. This experience of suffering enables them to comfort and console others, in particular the Corinthian believers, who according to Paul suffer the same things. This is because they too are laboring in favor of the gospel or supporting in some way those such as Paul who are dedicated to spreading that gospel. It is in this sense that they share in Paul's sufferings, as well as his consolation. While Paul does not explicitly say *how* the Corinthians share in his consolation, his idea seems to be that, when they see Paul suffer, they also suffer

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15. On the parallels between the ministry of Paul and that of Jesus, see Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, "Paul and Jesus: Similarity and Continuity," in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays*, ed. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, JSNTSup 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 117-44; Christian Wolff, "Humility and Self-Denial in Jesus' Life and Message and in the Apostolic Existence of Paul," in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays*, ed. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, JSNTSup 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 145-60.



due to their love for him and their solidarity with him and his ministry. When his suffering is alleviated, therefore, their suffering is alleviated as well, since they are relieved to know that he and his co-workers have been delivered from whatever hardships they were enduring.<sup>16</sup>

Paul appears to have the same basic idea in mind when he affirms that he and his co-workers undergo “the sufferings of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> There is no reason to take this phrase in a literal or ontological sense, as if in some mysterious way Paul and his co-workers actually participate in the very same sufferings that Christ himself endured when he was crucified.<sup>18</sup> Rather, Paul’s words should be understood in the sense that, because he and his co-workers are dedicated to the same task to which Christ had been dedicated and on behalf of which he also had suffered, they suffer the same type of things that Christ did.<sup>19</sup> Their sufferings are one and the same since they are the result of the same work that Christ carried out and in fact continues to carry out through them. There is nothing mystical or mysterious about this suffering, therefore, just as there is nothing mystical or mysterious about the Corinthian believers sharing the sufferings of Paul.<sup>20</sup>

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16. Victor Paul Furnish expresses the idea thus: “When the apostles are comforted in their afflictions, this enables others in the body of Christ to be comforted in theirs” (*II Corinthians*, 2nd ed., AB 32A [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984], 120).

17. On the background and interpretation of the phrase “the sufferings of Christ” in 2 Cor 1:3-7, see especially Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 118-21.

18. Such an idea is suggested by Margaret Thrall, who claims that the relationship between Paul’s afflictions and the sufferings of Christ “derives from a mystical fellowship with Christ grounded in baptism” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994], 1:108). Similarly, C. K. Barrett relates the sufferings of Christ with the “messianic woes” (*A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, HNTC [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], 61-62). Nothing in the context of 2 Cor 1:3-7, however, suggests that Paul has such ideas in mind.

19. As Murray J. Harris notes, Paul’s idea appears to be, not that the sufferings of the Corinthians “were identical with Paul’s affliction,” but rather that they were “generically, not actually, ‘the same’” (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 148). According to Paul Barnett, “These ‘afflictions’ arise directly from his missionary message and lifestyle, so abundantly set forth in this letter. Just as Christ suffered in his ministry and death from forces hostile to God, so, too, the apostle, in continuity with Christ, suffered in the course of his ministry and proclamation” (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 75).

20. In one of the most complete studies on 2 Cor 1:5, Kar Yong Lim argues that Paul’s allusion to the sufferings of Christ “cannot be understood in itself according to any of the categories of messianic woes, mystical union, or the imitation of Christ, but can only be fully appreciated if we consider the story of Jesus in the wider context of 2 Corinthians in particular and Paul’s mission theology in general. In the light of this, Paul most likely interprets the phrase *ta pathēmata tou Christou eis hēmas* as the

The simplicity of Paul's logic is evident from a similar affirmation that he makes further on in the same epistle. When he tells the Corinthian believers in 2 Cor 7:3, "you are in our hearts, to die and to live together," Paul clearly does not intend his words to be understood in a mystical, literal, or ontological sense. Paul and the Corinthians do not participate mystically in each other's death or resurrection. Instead, Paul is simply referring once more to the spirit of solidarity that exists between the Corinthian believers and himself, together with his co-workers. As he carries out his work as an apostle, Paul is constantly thinking of the Corinthians fondly, desiring their well-being and their consolidation in the faith they share. He also offers up prayers to God on their behalf and reflects on the things that he might do to assist and strengthen them. Among these things, of course, is the sending of a letter on his part. The Corinthian believers in turn share the same concern for Paul and want his work to accomplish its objectives. Because they share the same heart, mind, and purpose as Paul and his co-workers, when one group suffers, the other suffers as well. Conversely, when things go well for one of the two groups, the other also rejoices. It is in that sense that they "die and live together."<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere in the same letter, Paul mentions in a couple of passages some of the things that he has suffered and endured in his work for the gospel. In 2 Cor 6:4-10, he speaks of himself and his co-workers as those who commend themselves

in all things as servants of God, in great endurance, afflictions, hardships, tribulations, beatings, imprisonments, riots, travails, sleepless nights, and hunger; through pure conduct, knowledge, perseverance, acts of kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God, wielding the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left; in honor and ignominy, in contempt and admiration. We are regarded as deceivers by some and as truthful by others; as nobodies by some and as illustrious by others. We have been given up for dead, and yet, look! We are still alive! We are castigated, yet not killed, beset by sorrows, yet always rejoicing. We are poor, yet enrich many; we possess nothing, yet everything is ours.

Many of these ideas are repeated in 2 Cor 11:23-33. There Paul compares himself to the false apostles of Christ who claim to be superior to him:

Are they ministers of Christ? I am raving as if I were insane!—I am a better one: with far greater travails, far more imprisonments, beaten countless times, and often near death. Five times I have received the forty lashes

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suffering he experienced in his apostolic ministry for Christ" (*The Sufferings of Christ are Abundant in Us* [2 Corinthians 1.5]: A Narrative Dynamics Investigation of Paul's Sufferings in 2 Corinthians, LNTS 399 [London: T & T Clark, 2009], 63).

21. As Thrall notes, in 2 Cor 7:3 Paul is referring to the "deep bond of friendship, loyalty, affection and the like" that exists between those concerned (*Second Corinthians*, 1:483).

minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. On three occasions I have been shipwrecked; once I was adrift at sea for a night and a day. I have been on frequent journeys, in danger of drowning in rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger out in the wilderness, in danger while at sea, in danger from false sisters and brothers; in toil and in hardship, spending many nights sleepless, enduring hunger and thirst, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides all of that and other things, every day I bear the weight of my concern for all of the communities of believers. Who suffers weakness without my accompanying them in that weakness? Who is made to stumble without my becoming indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that make my weakness evident. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus—he who is blessed forever!—knows that I am not lying. In Damascus, the ethnarch under Aretas the king placed the city of the Damascenes under guard in order to arrest me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and thereby escaped from his hands.

According to the Jesus-tradition as best we can reconstruct it, Jesus himself did not suffer most of the things Paul mentions here. As far as we know, for example, Jesus was never shipwrecked, stoned, assaulted by bandits, or adrift at sea in danger of drowning. As Paul undoubtedly knows, however, Jesus did suffer *the same type of things* that Paul mentions here: rejection, persecution, derision, hardships, hunger, thirst, sleepless nights, anguish, weakness, privation, danger, and other types of affliction.<sup>22</sup> Like Paul, Jesus had been despised by many and accused of being a deceiver. The reason that Jesus had endured all of these things is that he had been dedicated to proclaiming the same gospel Paul proclaims. Jesus had also borne daily the weight of his care and concern for others and the pressures of his ministry on behalf of others. He had suffered a great deal as a result of his efforts to establish what Paul now calls the *ekklēsia*. Because Paul carries on the same work on behalf of the same objective, he therefore suffers the same things that Jesus suffered.<sup>23</sup>

Undoubtedly, the gospel that Paul proclaims revolves around Jesus rather than around Paul himself. Even though Paul can describe his own work in terms of laying a foundation, ultimately it is Christ who constitutes the only foundation (1 Cor 3:5-15). Nevertheless, because Paul, his co-workers, and the Corinthian believers are all dedicated to the same objective to which Christ had dedicated his life, Paul can affirm that they all share the same sufferings. In fact, just as Christ had given up his life as a result of his dedication to that objective, so also Paul and his co-workers give up their lives daily in the sense that they are willing to sacrifice everything

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22. On the parallels Paul draws between his own sufferings and those of Christ, see Wolff, "Humility," 156-59.

23. As Lim stresses, throughout 2 Corinthians 10-13, Paul sees his ministry as embodying the story of Jesus (*'Sufferings of Christ'*, 179-80).

for the same objective that had been Christ's in life and death. Ultimately, that objective is the establishment of the *ekklēsia* throughout the world in the way that Christ and his Father had envisioned from the start. In other words, Paul suffers what Jesus did because he proclaims the same gospel that Jesus did and thereby seeks the same objective that Jesus did, namely, the establishment and consolidation of communities that would live under Jesus as Lord so as to be characterized by the same love, righteousness, faithfulness, dedication, and commitment seen in Jesus himself and now reflected in Paul and others who believe in Jesus.

Like Jesus before him, Paul pays a very high price in order to attain that objective. In 2 Cor 12:15, he writes: "I will most gladly spend whatever is necessary for you and also be spent for your sake. If I love you all the more, will I be loved any less?"<sup>24</sup> The love for others that characterizes and drives Paul's ministry is the same love that characterized and drove Jesus' ministry. In the case of both Jesus and Paul, that love involves denouncing and opposing sin and injustice, as well as doing things that upset the status quo and affect the interests of many, including especially the rulers and powers of this age (1 Cor 2:6-8). As Jesus did, Paul calls on others to reject the predominant system or "world" in order to live in ways that are not accepted within that system and even clash with it.<sup>25</sup> The result of that rejection is persecution.

Of course, not everything that Jesus and Paul suffered was the result of persecution at the hands of others. Much of what they suffered was due simply to the tremendous sacrifices they made in order to carry out their itinerant ministries and serve others. In fact, as Paul indicates elsewhere in 2 Corinthians, much of his pain and anguish is caused by believers themselves. Just as Jesus' disciples at times caused him a great deal of grief, so also those who have come to live as followers of Jesus in the communities established by Paul at times cause him the same type of grief. In 2 Cor 2:1-5, after mentioning the painful visit he had made to Corinth, he continues: "For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not in order to cause you pain, but to let you know how great my love for you is" (v. 4). The reason Paul endures the same type of pain and suffering that Jesus did, therefore, is that he loves others with the same type of love seen in Jesus. That love moves Paul to be willing to make the same type of sacrifices that Jesus had made, and to do so with the same joy and gladness reflected in Jesus, in spite of the grief and anguish he

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24. Ralph P. Martin summarizes Paul's thought in this passage thus: "He is willing to extend himself to the uttermost limits of his capacity. . . . The point is that in 12:15 Paul will not withhold any resource he has, including himself. . . . Paul will spend himself—his energy, his health, if need be. . . , his reputation, his affections—on the Corinthians" (*2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 [Waco, TX: Word, 1986], 443).

25. See Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:18-31; Gal 6:14.



must bear as a result of his work. The satisfaction that Paul experiences as he contemplates the transformation of the lives of others through the faith he proclaims is the same satisfaction that Jesus had experienced when proclaiming that faith. For that reason, no matter what it costs Paul, he will not put a stop to his work on behalf of others, even if that means that he must give up or “spend” all that he has and be left totally “spent.” In this regard, he is once again exactly like Jesus, whom he proclaims as the crucified and risen Lord of all.

In 2 Corinthians 4 and 5, Paul alludes repeatedly to Jesus’ death in order to compare it with the death that he himself endures in a metaphorical sense. In 2 Cor 4:8-9, he affirms that he and his co-workers are “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; bewildered, but not despondent; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” He then continues: “always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our body. For we who are still alive are always being delivered up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. Therefore death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor 4:10-12).

Here again, there is no reason to suppose that Paul has in mind any type of mystical, literal, or ontological participation in Jesus’ sufferings and death, as if he carried around in his own body the past event of Jesus’ death in some mysterious way.<sup>26</sup> Rather, the context clearly indicates that he simply has in mind the idea that, in his own ministry, he is constantly on the brink of suffering the same type of violent and untimely death that Jesus suffered.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he endures hardships and afflictions of the same type that Jesus endured all the way to the cross as a result of his own work on behalf of others. Literally, Paul speaks of bearing in his body the “dying” or “deadness” (*nekrōsis*) of Jesus, that is, the *process* of dying or the *condition* of being dead.<sup>28</sup> While in one sense Paul’s language here is

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26. Jan Lambrecht, for example, claims that Paul has in mind “a kind of ontological union with Christ” in this passage, yet cites no evidence to support that claim (“The *nekrōsis* of Jesus: Ministry and Suffering in 2 Corinthians 4,7-15,” in *Studies on 2 Corinthians*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Jan Lambrecht, BETL 112 [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994], 309-33 [326]).

27. As Barnett argues, “The ‘dying of Jesus’ that takes place ‘in [Paul’s] body’ is the affliction, bewilderment, persecution, and humiliation mentioned in vv. 8-9” (*Second Corinthians*, 235).

28. Scholars have debated extensively the meaning of *nekrōsis* in 2 Cor 4:10, including the question of whether it refers to a process or condition; see Richard I. Deibert, *Second Corinthians and Paul’s Gospel of Human Mortality: How Paul’s Experience of Death Authorizes His Apostolic Authority in Corinth*, WUNT 2/430 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 141-81; Thrall, *Second Corinthians*, 1:331-34. In reality, however, this distinction is not particularly important as long as it is stressed that for Paul Jesus’ death was the consequence of a ministry such as his own, since in that case Paul is carrying about a

metaphorical, in another sense Paul is already experiencing a type of dying that is closely akin to that which Jesus endured. He knows that, as a result of his work on behalf of the same gospel Jesus proclaimed, he will probably die a death that is similar to that which Jesus suffered, and in a sense is already in the process of dying such a death.

Paul can also speak of Jesus' "deadness" in this passage because, in his risen condition, Jesus remains forever dead and crucified. Jesus' present condition of "deadness" is the result of his own faithful proclamation of the gospel, since that proclamation led him to be put to death on a cross before subsequently being raised by his Father. Because Paul dedicates his life to the proclamation of that same gospel, he too is constantly threatened with the same type of violent death that Jesus suffered and in a sense has already embraced that death as his own by continuing in his work despite the price he must pay. He therefore considers himself to be dead already, together with Jesus. He also experiences Jesus' same "deadness" in that he has given up his life and all that he is and has in order to proclaim the gospel, as Jesus did. In 1 Cor 15:31-32, Paul employs essentially the same logic that he does here. There, after alluding to the fact that he was forced to fight with wild beasts in Ephesus, he writes: "I die every day." In this passage, Paul obviously does not intend his words to be taken mystically, literally, or ontologically. He does not *actually* die every day. Instead, what he does every day is to endure hardships and put his life at risk for the sake of the gospel of Christ, knowing that because of his work on behalf of the gospel, there is a sense in which he is already as good as dead. Paul is willing to suffer and die for that gospel just as Jesus did. In fact, he is fairly certain that ultimately he will pay the price of his life for having proclaimed that gospel. In a sense, he is already paying that price every day by virtue of all that he suffers and his knowledge that at any moment he may die as a result of his work on behalf of Christ and the *ekklēsia*. In Paul's mind, from the moment he responded to Christ's call to be his apostle, he had already given up his life and anticipated the type of death he was going to die. In that sense, he was dead from that moment on. Of course, what spurs him on in the face of the death that he experiences daily and will endure literally at any moment is his conviction that God raises the dead (2 Cor 1:9-10).

These are the same ideas that Paul has in mind in 2 Cor 4:11, where he speaks of being delivered up to death "for the sake of Jesus" (*dia Iēsoun*). In the same context, he uses this same phrase to tell the Corinthian believers: "we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus'

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condition that will be the result of a process: Paul will ultimately die the same type of death as Jesus due to the fact that in his ministry he is constantly giving up his life for Jesus and for others. The *nekrōsis* is therefore a future condition that is already present in Paul, as well as an ongoing process in his life and ministry.

sake” (2 Cor 4:5).<sup>29</sup> In Paul’s thought, as a result of his own commitment to proclaiming the gospel with the aim of forming the same type of communities that Paul seeks to establish, Jesus himself had been “delivered up” (Rom 4:25; 8:32). Of course, because all of those communities are at the same time a single community, the *ekklēsia* that Paul seeks to see established throughout the world is the same *ekklēsia* that Jesus sought to establish in life and death. In Paul’s mind, Jesus had died as a result of his efforts and dedication to bringing that *ekklēsia* into existence and giving it the shape it now has. Because Paul is willing to give up his life as Jesus did in order to attain the same objective that Jesus sought, he too can affirm that he is constantly being delivered up to death for Jesus’ sake. Like Jesus, as he carries out his ministry on behalf of the gospel and the *ekklēsia*, he seeks to be obedient to God in everything and to do God’s will rather than his own. If at some point God calls on Paul to give up his life for the sake of Jesus, the gospel, and the *ekklēsia*, he will go willingly to his death, just as Jesus himself had willingly gone to his own death rather than putting an end to his ministry so as to avoid the cross. Only in that way is it possible for the type of community that constituted the objective of the ministry of Jesus and now constitutes the objective of that of Paul to be brought into existence. For Paul, of course, this is the same community that God himself desires to see as well. If God gives Paul over to death and wills for him to give up his life, therefore, God will do so for the same reason that he gave Jesus his Son over to death and willed for him to give up his life: it is impossible to create a community in which all are willing to give up their lives for others out of love for them if one is not willing to give up one’s own life or the life of the one whom one loves above all else in order for such a community to exist.

In Paul’s thought, the fact that Jesus’ desire to see such a community brought into existence was so strong that he was willing to give up his life so that it might become a reality means that nothing could please Jesus more than having others such as Paul dedicate their lives to that same end, in spite of the consequences. As Paul asserts in 2 Cor 5:9, whether he lives or must die as a result of his gospel proclamation, he seeks only to do what is pleasing to Jesus: “whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.” Thus, when Paul speaks of being delivered up “for Jesus’ sake,” his words should be understood in the sense that, out of love for Jesus, he gives his life for the same gospel and community that Jesus did, pursuing the same objective that Jesus sought to the very end in obedience to God out of love for all.

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29. As Lim observes, when Paul speaks of being handed over to death for Jesus’ sake in 2 Cor 4:11, the idea is not that Jesus himself is benefited but that others are benefited in the way Jesus desires by Paul’s willingness to suffer as a result of his ministry on their behalf (*Sufferings of Christ*, 116-17).

In 2 Cor 4:14–5:11, Paul uses similar imagery to speak of his willingness to endure suffering and death as a result of his apostolic ministry. While the outer person of those who work on behalf of the gospel is constantly wasting away, their inner person is being renewed every day (4:16). Of course, the same thing happens to those who accept that gospel. Both those who proclaim it and those who receive it favorably groan in an earthly tent, longing for their eternal dwelling to manifest itself from heaven (5:2–4). Here again Paul’s language is clearly metaphorical. Believers share the hope that, just as God raised Jesus, he will also raise them to be with Jesus in his presence (4:14).<sup>30</sup> In order to attain the “eternal weight of glory that is far beyond any comparison” prepared for them, however, they must continue to endure the “momentary, light affliction” that is theirs in the present (4:17). While their resurrection to that glory lies in the future, at the same time they are renewed every day, not because some mysterious transformation is taking place in their inner being, but rather because they become stronger in that hope and more convinced of it daily. They have also received the Holy Spirit from God as a pledge or guarantee of the new life that awaits them (5:5). It is this hope and confidence that animate the ministry of Paul and his co-workers, who dedicate themselves to persuading others of the message they proclaim so that God’s grace may continue “spreading to more and more people” (4:15; 5:6–8).<sup>31</sup>

In a number of passages from his other letters, Paul also refers to his work on behalf of the gospel as a struggle that he shares alongside other believers. He exhorts the Romans to struggle together with him in the love of the Spirit through their prayers on his behalf in the face of the opposition that he fears he may encounter in his trip to Jerusalem (Rom 15:30). In Phil 1:27, it is the Philippians who struggle together with Paul with one mind and one spirit “for the faith of the gospel.” Further on in the letter, he uses the same verb (*synathlein*) to refer to Euodia and Syntyche as those who have “struggled alongside me in the work of the gospel” (Phil 4:3). He also thanks the Philippian believers for sharing in the gospel with him, just as they share in his imprisonment (Phil 1:5, 7). After affirming that he knows how to be content under any circumstances, including scarcity and prosperity, hunger and fullness, and necessity and abundance, he expresses

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30. As Thrall observes, in 2 Cor 4:14 “it is best to suppose Paul is saying that God will raise him to join Jesus in the resurrection existence” (*Second Corinthians*, 1:343).

31. Throughout 2 Cor 4:16–5:5, Paul’s argument seems to revolve around the idea that his sufferings serve to demonstrate his faithfulness to Christ as an apostle and his love for the Corinthians, rather than representing a sign of God’s discontent with Paul or his disapproval of Paul’s ministry, as some who oppose Paul may have been claiming; see Fredrik Lindgård, *Paul’s Line of Thought in 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10*, WUNT 2/189 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 106–219.



to the Philippians his appreciation for the kindness they have shown in sharing in his afflictions through their support for him (Phil 4:11-14).

All of these passages speak merely of a shared suffering as a result of a commitment to a common goal or purpose rather than any type of mystical or ontological participation in the suffering of another. The suffering that Paul endures is the result of the sacrifices he makes for the work of the gospel on behalf of others. He speaks of himself as one whose life is being poured out sacrificially as a libation or drink-offering in the service of the faith of others (Phil 2:17). After mentioning that he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonians in their faith, he reminds them that he told them ahead of time that he and his co-workers would have to endure many afflictions (1 Thess 3:2-4). The Thessalonian believers should therefore know that those afflictions are not the result of God's displeasure or anger but rather of the dedication of Paul and his co-workers to the proclamation of the gospel out of love and concern for others. Similarly, in 1 Cor 9:12-27, he tells the Corinthians that he and his co-workers willingly "endure all things so as not to hinder the spread of the gospel." After affirming that he would rather die than be deprived of the pride and satisfaction he experiences in his ministry (v. 15), Paul refers to himself as a "slave of all" who has become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel (vv. 19, 22-23). Like a runner or fighter who subjects his body to intense training and even pummels it in order to subdue it, Paul gives up everything so that he may attain the imperishable prize that he associates with Christ and the gospel, not only for his own sake but for the sake of others as well (vv. 24-27).

In several passages from his other epistles, Paul draws the same type of comparison between that which Christ suffered and that which those who work on Christ's behalf must suffer. In two of these passages, he criticizes certain persons who claim to serve others in Christ's name yet in reality are "enemies of the cross" (Phil 3:18-19) and refuse to "endure persecution for the cross of Christ" (Gal 6:12). The reason he refers to them in this way is precisely that they seek their own interests and pleasures rather than being willing to suffer out of love for others, as Christ did.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Paul himself is willing to endure persecution for the sake of the cross (Gal 5:11; 6:17). In Rom 15:1-3, Paul points to the manner in which Christ was willing to suffer the reproaches of those who scorned him in order to exhort the Roman believers to be willing to do the same thing, namely, embrace the suffering that inevitably results from their efforts to strengthen others and build them up rather than seeking to avoid suffering at all costs in order to

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32. According to Stephen E. Fowl, it is likely that in both Phil 3:18-19 and Gal 6:12 Paul is referring to those who "seek to avoid suffering that might come their way as the result of their convictions about Christ" (*Philippians*, THNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 171).

pursue their own pleasure or interests instead.<sup>33</sup> Paul may have the cross in mind as well in Gal 6:2, where he tells the Galatians to take upon themselves the burdens of others in order to bear those burdens on their behalf. By doing so, they fulfill “the law of Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

Although Paul does not explicitly mention Jesus’ death on the cross in 1 Cor 4:9–13, there can be little doubt that he has it in the back of his mind, together with the ministry that led to it. There he speaks of going hungry, thirsty, and homeless and being poorly clothed, roughly treated, reviled, persecuted, and slandered, yet responding in love to those who mistreat him and his co-workers. Together with those co-workers, he is “exhibited” as one “condemned to death,” a “spectacle to the world,” so as to become like “the scum of the earth” and “the dregs of all things.” This was precisely how those whom the Romans put to death by crucifixion would be described.<sup>35</sup> For the sake of the gospel, Paul and his co-workers are willing to be ridiculed as “lunatics for Christ’s sake.” In this passage, then, Paul almost certainly has in mind the way that Jesus was exhibited on the cross as a spectacle to the world so as to be condemned, humiliated, and mocked in the same way that Paul and his co-workers are.

It is extremely important to stress, however, that for Paul *suffering is not an end in itself*. Paul is not a masochist. He does not seek to suffer. Instead, what he seeks is to enable others to experience the well-being and salvation that he associates with the gospel and to see them confirmed and strengthened in that gospel. Thus, for example, when he points to the things he has suffered and endured in 2 Corinthians 10–13 in order to boast, he is not saying that what makes him superior to the “super-apostles” whom he criticizes as “false apostles” is that he has suffered more than they have, as if suffering were good or desirable. Rather, his idea is that his willingness to suffer all sorts of afflictions, hardships, and persecutions on behalf of the gospel is proof of the tremendous love he has for the Corinthians. It is precisely that love for the Corinthians that he stresses repeatedly throughout

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33. As Leander E. Keck points out, given that Psalm 69 “came to be associated with various elements of the Passion story,” it is likely that when Paul cites Ps 69:9 in Rom 15:3, he is referring to the mocking that Jesus endured on the cross (*Romans*, ANTC [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005], 350–51).

34. John M. G. Barclay sees a parallel between Gal 6:2 and Rom 15:1–3 and on that basis suggests that the love that Paul associates with the law of Christ may be especially the love he manifested in his death (*Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians*, SNTW [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988], 133–34). It may also be significant that the same Greek verb that Paul uses to speak of bearing others’ burdens in Gal 6:2 (*bastazein*) is used in Luke 14:27 and John 19:17 to speak of bearing the cross and by Paul himself in Gal 6:17 to allude to the *stigmata* or scars of Jesus that he bears on his body as a result of his ministry on behalf of others.

35. See B. J. Oropeza, *1 Corinthians*, NCC (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 61.

2 Corinthians.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the other so-called apostles are *not* willing to suffer the same type of things on their behalf because they do not love them as Paul does. Instead, those pseudo-apostles seek to enslave and devour the Corinthians, taking advantage of them and even slapping them in the face so as to exalt themselves (11:20). Paul, however, is truly dedicated to serving the Corinthians and desires only that they be built up and made complete (11:8; 13:9-10). It is for that reason that he suffers.

In fact, after reminding the Corinthians that he and Titus did not seek to take advantage of them but instead conducted themselves in a fitting and worthy manner while working among them, he tells them: “All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, we have been speaking in Christ in the presence of God, and all that we have said has had the purpose of building you up” (2 Cor 12:17-19). In other words, the reason why Paul points to all that he has given up and suffered in order to carry out his ministry on behalf of the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 10–13 is not that he wishes to defend himself to the Corinthians, as if his concern were merely for himself. Rather, it is for *their* sake that he stresses all that he has done and suffered on their behalf.<sup>37</sup> His hope is that, by realizing how much Paul has endured in order to build them up, they will pay attention to him instead of those who seek instead to tear them down, caring only for themselves rather than for the Corinthians (10:8-12). The jealousy that Paul has for the Corinthians is a “godly jealousy,” since unlike the false apostles, he is jealous not for *his own sake* but *for the sake of the Corinthians themselves* (11:2). That jealousy is motivated only by his deep desire to present them to Christ as Christ’s betrothed.<sup>38</sup> According to Paul, the reason why he sought to avoid being a burden to the Corinthians by not asking anything of them when he proclaimed the gospel to them is simply that *he loves them* (11:7-11; 12:13-15).

For Paul, what is true of his own ministry is also true of the ministry that Christ carried out. What Christ sought was not *to suffer* but *to serve others in love*. In Paul’s words, even though he was rich, Christ became poor for the sake of others such as the Corinthians, since only by doing so could he accomplish his objective of enriching others by bringing them to live as members of his community (2 Cor 8:9). Paul seeks that same objective, and thus is also willing to endure hardships and poverty in order to make others rich (2 Cor 6:10). It is not the poverty of Christ or Paul in itself, however, that makes others rich. Rather, the only way to serve others in love is to

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36. See 2 Cor 2:4; 6:11-12; 11:11; 12:15.

37. Thrall summarizes Paul’s thought here thus: “Paul has not been speaking to obtain a judicial verdict from the Corinthians, but for the sake of their spiritual and moral welfare, and on account of his love for them” (*Second Corinthians*, 2:857).

38. As Barnett points out, it may be preferable to use the language of “zeal” rather than “jealousy” to translate Paul’s thought in 2 Cor 11:2 (*Second Corinthians*, 499-500).

empty oneself in the way that Christ did in order to enter into their midst and give oneself to them by serving them (Phil 2:6-8). Paul points to the Macedonian communities as an example of those who “gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God” in order to exhort the Corinthians to live lives characterized by the same type of graciousness and earnest, sincere love (2 Cor 8:5-8, 16).

Throughout his letters, Paul points to this same love for others as that which motivates him to do all that he does on their behalf. The reason he desires to go to Rome to see the believers there is to strengthen and encourage them and share some spiritual gift with them (Rom 1:11-12). He writes to the Corinthian believers and visits them because he wants them to be filled with joy and established in their faith so that they may do all things in love.<sup>39</sup> In Gal 4:11-20, he reminds the Galatian believers of the enormous love that led him to go to Galatia to proclaim the gospel to them and exhorts them to recall how his love for them evoked in them the same love for him. In fact, they had come to love him so much that they would have been willing to pluck out their own eyes for him if necessary (4:15).<sup>40</sup> Like a mother about to give birth, Paul is willing to endure the pain of childbirth if only Christ may be formed in them again (4:19). It is his love for the Galatians that provokes him to such anger at those who seek only to bewitch and enslave the Galatians and thereby do them harm, acting out of self-interest rather than any concern for the Galatians.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Paul tells the Philippians that, even though he would prefer to “depart and be with Christ” so as no longer to have to endure suffering on behalf of Christ and the gospel, he prefers to “continue in the flesh” in order to enable them to progress and grow in their faith (Phil 1:21-26). In other words, rather than seeking his own comfort, which he would obtain if he were to be taken away to live in Christ’s presence, he prefers to continue to labor on behalf of the Philippians, despite the sacrifices and intense sufferings involved. Due to his concern for their well-being, he considers it to be “no trouble” to write to them from jail, yet that same concern leads him to warn them regarding the “dogs” or “evil workers” who “mutilate the flesh” and thus would do harm to the Philippians motivated by their own self-interests (3:1-2). He also tells the Philippian believers that, while he does not actively seek their gifts, he receives them because by doing so he is able to see the profit or fruit he desires brought about in them and others (4:17). His logic here is not only that the support that the Philippians provide for him enables him to continue in his ministry, but also that through their generosity

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39. See 1 Cor 16:14; 2 Cor 1:24; 2:4.

40. According to Richard N. Longenecker, the reference to the Galatians plucking their eyes out for Paul “is probably an idiom that speaks of going to the extreme to provide for another’s needs” (*Galatians*, WBC 41 [Dallas: Word, 1990], 193).

41. See Gal 2:4; 3:1; 4:17; 5:1, 7-12; 6:12-13.



and commitment to supporting Paul's ministry they are themselves enriched, since they grow in their generosity and their love for Christ. He thus accepts their gracious gifts *for their sake* and not for his alone.

In 1 Thess 2:1-12, Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers that he and his co-workers came to Thessalonica in the midst of considerable suffering, mistreatment, and opposition in order to share the gospel with them. What Paul and his co-workers sought was not their own glory but simply to care for the Thessalonians gently and tenderly, as a nursing mother cares for her children (vv. 1-7). Because the Thessalonians are very dear to them, it gave Paul and his co-workers great pleasure not only to share the gospel with "fond affection" for the Thessalonians, but also to share with them their very lives (v. 8). Paul reminds them that he treated them as a loving father treats his children, exhorting, encouraging, and pleading with them to live in the way that God desires for their own good (vv. 9-12). In the midst of their ongoing distress and affliction, Paul and his co-workers rejoice that they are able to strengthen and encourage the Thessalonian believers, establish them in their faith, and see their love abound and increase (1 Thess 3:1-12). Paul even states explicitly that he had wanted to work among the Thessalonian believers, not for *his* sake, but for *theirs* (1 Thess 1:5).

While Col 1:24 may not have been written by Paul, it expresses very well the same ideas that we have seen here. There Paul as the author of Colossians writes: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and I fill up in my flesh what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the *ekklēsia*." This verse has confounded many interpreters because they suppose that the purpose of Christ's sufferings was to atone for sins. In that case, it is shocking to think not only that what Christ suffered on the cross was not sufficient to make full atonement for human sins but also that the sufferings of Paul should be required and accepted by God to atone for human sins as well.<sup>42</sup> In reality, however, this verse has nothing to do with atonement for sins. Rather, the idea is very simple: while Christ suffered a great deal to establish the *ekklēsia*, the task of consolidating and building up that *ekklēsia* and bringing it to extend throughout the world

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42. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn's concern for "the possible implication that somehow Christ's sufferings had been deficient or insufficient" presupposes that a certain amount of suffering on the part of Christ had been necessary to atone for sins (Alexander J. M. Wedderburn and Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, NTT [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 38). The same presupposition leads W. F. Flemington to insist that Col 1:24 must not be read as contradicting "the finished and decisive character of what God through Christ effected by means of the Cross" ("On the Interpretation of Colossians 1:24," in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 84-90 [86]).

was far from finished when he died. For that reason, apostles such as Paul must continue to dedicate themselves to that task. Yet because for the reasons we have seen above that task inevitably entails suffering and enduring great afflictions, those such as Paul who are dedicated to it must continue to suffer the same type of things that Christ himself suffered until the day when it will finally be completed in the way God desires and intends. Like Paul himself, *the reason why Christ suffered was not to atone for the sins of anyone but to establish and build up the ekklēsia.*

### *Paul's Understanding of Jesus' Death*

If Paul affirms that he is willing to give up his life to attain the same things that Jesus had sought in life and death, then it follows that in Paul's mind Jesus himself had suffered and died precisely because he had pursued the same objectives as Paul does in his ministry. In a number of passages from his epistles, Paul states explicitly what those objectives are.

Throughout Romans 6, for example, Paul describes the new reality that Jesus had sought to bring about when he gave up his life. There Paul affirms that there are two ways in which human beings can live. The first is to live as slaves of righteousness, justice, and obedience, which is equivalent to being "enslaved to God" (Rom 6:13). The second is to live as slaves of sin, unrighteousness, injustice, impurity, and lawlessness (6:12-22). Paradoxically, however, to be a slave to God and righteousness is in reality to be free. According to Paul, believers are "free from sin" and dead to it as they live as slaves or servants of God. Paul's words in this passage make sense only when it is understood that, in Paul's thought, *sin destroys true life and well-being.* In contrast, when one lives obediently as a slave of God, one comes to experience salvation (*sōteria*) by being made whole (*sōs*), both in this life and the life to come. The reason for this is that, when human beings submit fully to God's will rather than their own and consider their lives to be God's so that he may do what he wishes in and with them, they make it possible for God to make them whole in the way he desires. What God commands of those who live as his slaves is that they love him and one another with their whole heart for their own good, giving themselves to others as God has given himself to them in Christ. Only if they do this can they attain the well-being God desires for them and all people, since that well-being is inseparable from a life lived in love. As they submit to God in all things as his slaves, God guides them in the way that they are to go for their own good and the good of others. Thus, when one lives "enslaved" to God and sees oneself as belonging to God rather than to oneself (1 Cor 6:19), one's way of life will enable one to experience the well-being, wholeness, life, and salvation that God desires for all.

In Romans 7 and 8, Paul speaks of the two possibilities for human existence in terms of being "in the flesh" and living "in the Spirit." The flesh

holds one captive to sin and does not allow one to do the good that would enable one to experience the well-being and wholeness God desires for all (Rom 7:7-24). In contrast, God's Spirit, who is "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus," sets one free from both sin and the law and thereby allows one to experience life and peace by putting to death the deeds of the body or flesh (Rom 8:1-14). As Paul repeats in Rom 8:15-17 and Gal 4:6-7, rather than living under a spirit of slavery, believers receive a spirit (or Spirit) of adoption that enables them to live as God's children and thereby attain the true life, well-being, and wholeness that God desires for them. Whereas the flesh makes such a life impossible by virtue of the fact that it leads to the type of destructive behavior Paul describes in passages such as Gal 5:19-21, the Spirit produces fruit such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, thoughtfulness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). *In and of themselves*, these kinds of behavior enable believers to experience the joy, peace, and well-being of which Paul speaks.

In Paul's thought, *all of this is what Jesus sought in life and death*. He sought to deliver others from their slavery to sin, unrighteousness, and death and to free them to live in ways that make it possible for them to attain the well-being, joy, and peace that God desires for all. Jesus did this by reaching out to others in love for them in the same way that Paul does, instructing, exhorting, and guiding them so as to lay the foundation necessary for the *ekklēsia*, the community in which all live in Jesus' same love under his lordship—a lordship that he exercises for *their* sake rather than his own. Undoubtedly, Paul does not proclaim himself as Lord or call apostles of his own, as Jesus did. Nevertheless, he follows Jesus in reaching out to others seeking to establish the same community that constituted the objective of Jesus himself in life and death, a community in which all would share the same commitment to the well-being of all seen first in Jesus himself and now in those who call him Lord.

In the present age, however, those who seek to enable others to be freed from their slavery to sin and unrighteousness inevitably face opposition and generate conflict at the hands of those who do the enslaving. For Paul, sin, unrighteousness, and injustice are *forces* or *powers* that hold human beings in subjection and slavery and thereby *oppress* them. Those forces are found not merely in the hearts of individual human beings but especially in the structures and systems of what Paul calls the "world" or "the present (evil) age."<sup>43</sup> Whether they know it or not, those who do not live under Christ live instead under "the god of the present age," who "has blinded the minds of unbelievers to prevent them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory

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43. See Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20-21, 27-28; 2:12; 3:18-19; 4:9; 5:10; Gal 1:4; 6:14. On Paul's understanding of structural sin, see Mercedes López and Carlos Mesters, "Codicia, corrupción, pecado estructural en la Carta a los Romanos," *RIBLA* 78 (2018): 103-12.

of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). Life, joy, freedom, and well-being can be attained only by resisting sin, unrighteousness, and injustice and struggling against these things in order to overcome and vanquish them. In Rom 13:12, Paul exhorts believers to take up the "weapons of the light" (*hopla tou phōtos*).<sup>44</sup> He uses similar imagery in Rom 6:13 to urge believers to present their members to God as "weapons of justice" (*hopla dikaiosynēs*) rather than presenting them to sin as "weapons of injustice" (*hopla adikias*).<sup>45</sup> In 2 Cor 10:3-5, he speaks of using weapons that are contrary to the flesh in order to wage war and destroy "strongholds" that consist of *ways of thinking* (*logismoi*) that rise up presumptuously against the knowledge of God.<sup>46</sup> These ways of thinking take human beings captive and therefore must be brought into subjection. This occurs as people come to live in obedience to Christ. The "war" or "struggle" that must take place is not to be waged in some supernatural sphere, therefore, but in human hearts and minds, since what must be overcome are *ways of thinking and behaving*.

For these same reasons, Jesus' efforts to bring others to live in love and righteousness as members of his community of followers so as to attain there the well-being and wholeness he sought for all generated conflict and opposition. Those human beings who held power over others by virtue of their alliance with the forces of sin, unrighteousness, and injustice were led by those forces to seek to silence Jesus by putting him to death (1 Cor 2:7-8). They could not tolerate Jesus' efforts to free human beings from their power, just as they subsequently could not tolerate the efforts of Paul on behalf of the same objective.

From Paul's perspective, the conflict and opposition that Jesus' activity on behalf of others generated left both Jesus and God his Father with two alternatives. The first of these was to bring to an end Jesus' efforts to create the type of community that both God and Jesus desired to see by having him back down from those efforts. Were they to have done so, it might have been possible for Jesus to have been spared the cross, yet the type of community that God and Jesus had sought to establish would never have become a reality. God might also have spared Jesus the suffering of the cross by taking him up into heaven prior to his passion and death in the same way that he had taken Enoch and Elijah into heaven before they died. Had God done this, however, he could no longer have expected to create a community in which all would be willing to give up what they regarded as most precious in order to seek the well-being of all out of love for them. If God

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44. On Paul's battle-imagery in this passage, see Søren Agersnap, *Baptism and the New Life: A Study of Romans 6.1-4* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1999), 366-78.

45. On the possibility that Paul has in mind a military metaphor in Rom 6:13, see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 337.

46. As Harris observes, *logismoi* here "clearly has a pejorative sense" and in the context refers not only to ways of thinking but attitudes as well (*Second Corinthians*, 681-82).



had truly wished to bring into existence a community in which all would love one another and others with no limits and hold nothing back, when faced with the suffering and death of his Son, he could hardly have placed limits on his own love and held back his Son. The only way in which he could hope to accomplish that objective was to give up the life of his Son rather than sparing him such a death. If he truly loved human beings and wished for them to live in the same love, he could do no other. Therefore, when Jesus' ministry led to the threat of a violent death, the only alternative that God and Jesus had was to have Jesus remain firm to the end without backing down and let him be handed over to such a death. Only then could the type of community that God had sought to create together with his Son be brought into existence.

Paul therefore affirms not only that Jesus died but that he “gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Gal 1:4). In other words, in obedience to his Father, he chose to give up his life rather than seeking to save it so that others might be delivered from their sinful ways and the present evil age. Rather than pleasing himself or pursuing his own interests, he sought the good of others (Rom 15:3; Phil 2:1-8). Because he refused to compromise with sin but remained steadfast in his struggle against it, “he died to sin” (Rom 6:10).<sup>47</sup> His objective was that others might be constrained by his same love and live for him by living for others as well: “For the love of Christ constrains us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; consequently, all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:14-15). Paul affirms not only that Christ gave himself for others in accordance with his Father's will but also that God himself gave up his Son (Rom 8:32; cf. 4:24-25). In the same way that Paul gives up his life for others in accordance with God's will as a result of his commitment to bringing others to leave behind their sins and live under Christ so that they may find life and salvation in him, so also Christ gave up his own life in obedience to his Father with the same objective in mind. It was to that same end as well that God gave up the life of his Son. Had God acted to spare his Son from death, the *ekklesia* of which Paul speaks throughout his epistles would never have come into existence. Much less would it have taken the shape that it had now as a community in which all were willing to give of themselves fully to and for others in the same way that God and Christ had.

It might be thought that there were other alternatives open to God. One of these might have been simply to crush the forces of sin and evil through an act of power so as to destroy them. According to the logic of

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47. Robert Jewett argues that, when Paul speaks of Christ having died to sin, he has in mind the “murderous consequences” of the sinful human actions Christ endured (*Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 407).

Paul's thought, however, this was not an option, since what God wanted was for people to be brought to live in the type of love and solidarity that Paul associates with the community of believers. Love is not something that one can bring about in others by force, coercion, imposition, or acts of power. Rather, by its very nature, love must be voluntary and heartfelt. In order to love, one must *want* and *choose* to love, yet that can only happen when one is *brought* to love by being loved. Furthermore, because sin and unrighteousness were so deeply rooted in human beings and ingrained in their ways of thinking and behaving, for God to have acted to crush and destroy sin and unrighteousness by an act of sovereign power would by definition have involved crushing and destroying human beings themselves. Therefore, according to Paul's logic, to eradicate sin and evil in that way was not an option, at least not at present. While the day will come when God will indeed take such a measure by pouring out his wrath on sin and evil to destroy them,<sup>48</sup> before doing so he instead chooses to be active in the ways Paul describes to bring about in human beings the love he desires to see in them for their own good. Because the behavior of those who come to live in that love will make it possible for them to attain the peace and joy that Paul associates with the reign of God (Rom 14:17), they will be saved rather than destroyed in the day when God will do away with sin, evil, and injustice definitively. In that way, he will finally make it possible for them to live free of the pain and suffering caused by those who insist on oppressing others and destroying their lives and happiness.

In the thought of Paul, therefore, the reason that Jesus had died was not because there was no other way in which God might forgive human beings their sins or destroy the forces of evil. Nor had Jesus died in order that others might come to participate in his death in some mysterious fashion or reproduce that same death in themselves. Rather, the reason that Jesus had died was because he had dedicated himself to the establishment of the type of community of which Paul speaks throughout his epistles, a community in which all would give themselves to one another and to others with a love that knows no limits and holds nothing back. What had been impossible without Jesus' death was not the forgiveness of sins or the destruction of sin and death, but the type of community that God has now brought into existence by sending his Son and handing him over to death when his efforts to make that community a reality led to the threat of the cross.

Furthermore, according to this interpretation of Paul's thought, Jesus' death did not save or redeem anyone. Strictly speaking, it did not have a purpose or an objective. God had not designed or orchestrated Jesus' death in order to "effect" something by that death. What saves human beings is not Jesus' death but his faithfulness and dedication to the task of establishing

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48. See Rom 2:5-10; 3:5-6; 5:9; 16:20; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9.

the type of community of which Paul repeatedly speaks, since it is by coming to live as part of that community that believers attain the salvation or wholeness that God desires for them. Throughout his epistles, Paul never affirms that Jesus' death, his blood, or his cross saves, justifies, or redeems anyone or reconciles them to God. Instead, what he says is that believers are justified, redeemed, and reconciled to God *by means of Jesus' death or blood*, that is, by means of his unbending commitment to the creation of a community in which they might come to live under him so as to attain there through him the justification and redemption he sought for them and experience the joy of living in peace with God and one another as God's friends rather than his enemies (Rom 5:6-10).

In the thought of Paul, all of these things had constituted God's objective when he sent his Son and subsequently handed him over to death. What God had wanted was not that his Son die but that he consecrate himself fully to the task of forming the type of community Paul describes in his epistles, that is, the *ekklēsia*. However, both God and his Son had known ahead of time that Jesus' consecration to that task would result in his death. In spite of this knowledge, they had chosen for Jesus to undertake that task and thereby had embraced fully the consequences of that task at the same time. From the perspective of Paul, only by giving himself fully to human beings in love by sending his Son to bring about in them his same love could God accomplish that objective. When his Son's efforts on behalf of that objective led to conflict and the threat of the cross at the hands of the rulers of this age, according to Paul God gave up his Son rather than sparing him such a death out of love for the sinful human beings he sought to save, who were not only undeserving of such a love but actively opposed to it. By embracing the cross rather than shunning it, however, God and Jesus his Son had made it possible for a community to exist in which all now live in that same love so as to be reconciled with God and one another and to live in peace with God and others there.

It is these ideas that Paul appears to have in mind when he affirms that "God shows his love for us in that, when we were still sinners, Christ died for us," and that "when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Rom 5:8, 10). As Paul's use of the Greek preposition *dia* in this latter verse makes clear, what has now made that reconciliation possible was Jesus' willingness to give up his life so that the type of community that he and his Father sought to bring into existence from the start might now become a reality throughout the world.<sup>49</sup> It is the community of which Paul speaks in Rom 8:29, composed of those who are being conformed to the image of God's Son so as to constitute a new family

49. Ernst Käsemann rightly notes that the preposition *dia* here is clearly instrumental (*Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 138).

together with him. Yet, as Paul states in 2 Cor 5:18-21, it is not Jesus' faithfulness to death alone that has made such a reconciliation possible, but *all* of the saving activity that God has carried out not only through Christ but through his ambassadors such as Paul as well. Because not only God and his Son Jesus but others such as Paul willingly embrace the consequences of their efforts to bring others to live in love under Jesus in the context of that community, both that community and the type of love embodied by Jesus and God in the death of his Son have now become a reality in the *ekklēsia*. As a result of what God has done through his Son, any who are not committed to living in that same love cannot rightly claim to form part of that community or truly call Jesus their Lord. Both that community as a whole and the individuals who belong to it are now stamped forever by the cross as that which defines them above all else, just as it forever defines the Lord under whom they live.

Although Paul clearly believed that in his death Jesus had laid down an example or model that others are to follow and imitate, it must be stressed that he did not see this as the *objective* of Jesus' death. Strictly speaking, what believers are to imitate and reproduce is not Jesus' sufferings and death but his unbending love for others and his willingness to endure suffering and if necessary even death so that they might be brought to live in that same love as members of his community of followers. It is this that they also see in Paul and his co-workers.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the reason that Jesus had gone to the cross was not that he wished to lay down an example for others but rather that he had dedicated himself to establishing the type of community of which Paul speaks so that people throughout the world might be brought to attain life and salvation by living in love as members of that community.

In order to understand the difference between these two ideas, a couple of the images that Paul uses in 1 Thess 2:7-12 may prove helpful. There Paul reminds the believers at Thessalonica of the way in which he and his co-workers conducted themselves as they proclaimed the gospel to them:

But we behaved gently among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our very selves, because you had become so beloved to us. For you remember, brothers and sisters, our labor and toil. We worked night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you as we proclaimed the gospel of God among you. Both you and God are witnesses of how purely, uprightly, and blamelessly we behaved toward those of you who believed, just as you know how we treated each of you as a father does his children, exhorting and encouraging and pleading with you to lead lives worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

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50. See Rom 15:1-3; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:1-8; 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6-7. On this idea in Paul's thought, see Larry W. Hurtado, "Jesus' Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament," *SJT* 57 (2004): 413-33 (431-32).



When Paul and his co-workers behaved in this way toward the Thessalonians, what they were seeking was not merely to lay down an example for them to follow or to show them how to love others. Rather, they sought to care for them, nurture and strengthen them, and build them up, even though by doing so at the same time they undoubtedly provided them with an example to follow. Similarly, a mother who cares gently and tenderly for her children is not simply attempting to teach them something, just as a father who exhorts, encourages, and pleads to his children to live in the way he desires does not do so for the purpose of giving them a lesson in how to exhort, encourage, and plead with others to live in the same way. Rather, the activity of such a mother or father is *an end in itself* aimed at the well-being of the children. In the same way, when Jesus gave himself to and for others all the way to the end of his life, even though he laid down an example for others, this was not the purpose or objective of his death, as if he had wanted to die so that he might give others an object lesson. Rather, his death was the consequence of his dedication and efforts to nurture, strengthen, and build up others so that through them the type of community he sought to establish might become a reality.

### *Isaiah 53 and Christ's Death for Sins*

Although in a couple of passages from his epistles Paul cites words from Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (hereafter Isaiah 53) in order to claim that the proclamation regarding Christ was foretold there,<sup>51</sup> nowhere does Paul ever allude to the verses from that passage that describe the sufferings of the servant of God of whom it speaks. Nevertheless, many Pauline scholars believe that Paul has this passage in mind in 1 Cor 15:3–4, where he affirms that Jesus “died for our sins” and was buried and raised “according to the Scriptures,” and perhaps Rom 5:19 and Phil 2:7–8 as well.<sup>52</sup> In particular, his affirmation that Jesus was “handed over on account of our transgressions” in Rom 4:25 echoes the last phrase of Isaiah 53, where it is said that the servant of whom the passage speaks “was handed over on account of our sins.”<sup>53</sup>

For centuries, Isaiah 53 has been understood on the basis of the idea of penal substitution. According to this idea, when the passage speaks of the servant bearing the infirmities and iniquities of others, being wounded

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51. See Rom 10:16; 15:21.

52. On Paul's use of Isaiah 53, see especially Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 503–16; Craig A. Evans, “Isaiah 53 in the Letters of Peter, Paul, Hebrews, and John,” in *The Gospel according to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 145–70 (159–62). On what follows, see David A. Brondos, *Jesus' Death in New Testament Thought*, vol. 1: *Background* (Mexico City: Theological Community of Mexico, 2018), 203–22.

53. See Jewett, *Romans*, 342–43.

and crushed for their transgressions, enduring the chastisement of others so that they might thereby be healed, and being handed over for their sins (vv. 4-6, 10, 12), what is meant is that the servant delivers others from the divine punishment due to their sins by enduring that punishment in their stead as their substitute.<sup>54</sup> In reality, however, there is no evidence that Paul or anyone else in antiquity read the passage in that way.<sup>55</sup> Such a reading once again is based on the presupposition that in Jewish thought and the thought of Paul, it was impossible for God to forgive human beings their sins without exacting retribution for those sins by having someone endure the penalty or consequences of those sins in their place. Nor does the passage affirm that the servant's suffering or death constituted the *basis* upon which others obtained forgiveness or healing.<sup>56</sup>

What the passage *does* affirm is that the transgressions of the people were the *cause* of the servant's suffering and death, that he bore the sins of others, that the chastisement that led to the people's peace was upon him, and that through his bruises, wounds, or beatings the people were healed

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54. Shalom M. Paul, for example, writes: "The servant bears the sins of the many, and because of his afflictions the multitude is forgiven. . . ." (*Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary*, ECC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 398). Edward J. Young similarly affirms: "When the servant bore the guilt of our sins, we are saying that he bore the punishment that was due to us because of those sins, and that is to say that he was our substitute. His punishment was vicarious. Because we had transgressed, he was pierced to death; and being pierced and crushed was the punishment that he bore in our stead" (*The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965-1972], 3:348).

55. On the interpretations of Isaiah 53 found in Jewish writings of the Second Temple period, see Martin Hengel, "The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 75-146. Although Hengel finds several texts that seem to allude to the suffering of certain figures that are identified with the servant of Isaiah 53, he is forced to recognize that the motif of vicarious suffering and death scarcely appears in the writings of that period. At most, a few texts may hint vaguely at that idea.

56. Contra, for example, John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 386-89. David L. Allen similarly goes far beyond anything found in Isaiah 53 or the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole by affirming that "the punishment for sin in view in Isaiah 53 is not temporal punishment but spiritual (eternal) punishment" ("Substitutionary Atonement and Cultic Terminology in Isaiah 53," in *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012], 171-89 [175]). In fact, contrary to James D. Smart, who claims that "the central theme of ch. 53 is forgiveness" (*History and Theology in Second Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40-66* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965], 195), the passage does not even mention forgiveness, but only the peace and healing that the people attain, as well as their justification (according to the MT).

and made whole (53:4-6, 8, 10-12). All of these affirmations can be understood perfectly well without recurring to the idea of penal substitution and without attributing the forgiveness of sins to the servant's sufferings and death. In fact, the passage itself indicates that it should be read differently. It stresses the reaction of the people to the servant's ghastly appearance: those who observed the servant were astonished at his semblance, since he no longer even appeared to be human (52:14), and the powerful were left speechless upon contemplating the way he had been disfigured by all that he had endured (52:15-53:2). Many even hid their faces from him and despised him out of revulsion for him (53:3). The rest of the passage also stresses the cruel sufferings and injustices the servant endured and the unjust and violent way he was put to death, as well as his willingness to submit to these things without protesting, retaliating, or even opening his mouth.

Because the speakers in the passage refer to "our" transgressions, sins, and iniquities, it would also be seen as a confession of sins on the part of the speakers.<sup>57</sup> In this way, they acknowledge openly their sin. At the same time, the speakers affirm that the servant had done nothing to deserve the mistreatment, ordeals, and death he endured. Initially the speakers appear to have believed that God was chastising the servant for his own sins, yet while they continue to see God as the one causing his sufferings and inflicting pain on him (vv. 4, 10), they come to the conclusion that God did so because of *their* sins and perhaps those of others as well, rather than any sins of the servant himself.<sup>58</sup> In v. 5, what the servant is said to have suffered is a chastisement which had the goal of correction, discipline, or even instruction. Such is the meaning of both the Hebrew term *mûsar* and the Greek term *paideia* used in the Septuagint translation of this verse.<sup>59</sup> The irony is that God brought about the people's peace and healing by inflicting the chastisement necessary to correct the people and bring them to repent of their sins, *not on the people themselves*, but *on the righteous and innocent servant*.

Although the passage states that the servant suffered and died so that the people might attain this peace and healing, it *does not* affirm that the servant's sufferings and death *in themselves* brought peace and healing for the people. Rather, in the context of the passage as a whole, that peace and healing would have been understood as the result of the people's

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57. Jesper Tang Nielsen rightly observes: "In the confession that the servant is slain for their sins they confess that they are sinners" ("The Lamb of God: The Cognitive Structure of a Johannine Metaphor," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 200 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006], 217-56 [231]).

58. On this point, see especially Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, AB 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 352-53.

59. See Fredrik Häggland, *Isaiah 53 in the Light of Homecoming after Exile*, FAT 2/31 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 39.

recognition and repentance of their sins, since they could hardly enjoy peace and healing if they continued unabated in their sinful and destructive behavior. According to the passage, therefore, what God had sought to accomplish through the servant was that the people attain peace and healing by acknowledging their sins and turning back to God in obedience, no longer following their own way so as to continue to go astray like sheep (v. 6). It was not the servant's sufferings and death, however, that accomplished this objective, but rather the servant's persistence to the task of bringing the people back to God in spite of all that he suffered as a result of that persistence.<sup>60</sup>

The notion that the sins of the people were the *cause* of God's placing his servant in their midst and having him endure violence, suffering, and death there would have been understood on the basis of these same ideas. While the passage states that *God* inflicted sufferings on the servant, crushing and striking him, the fact that it refers to his bruises, wounds, and beatings, speaks of him behaving like a lamb led to the slaughter, and affirms that he was taken away by a perversion of justice clearly communicates the idea that much of what the servant suffered was inflicted on him *by other people*. He was despised and rejected *by others*, who hid their faces from him (53:3). Even the infirmities and diseases that he is said to have borne would have been regarded as being at least to some extent the result of the injuries he suffered at the hands of others, though in some sense they were also brought about by God.

If we combine these ideas with one another, we can discern a narrative that is closely akin to narratives we find elsewhere throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Jewish literature, as well as a number of passages from the New Testament itself.<sup>61</sup> Israel's God sends his servant—usually a prophet—into the midst of a sinful people in an attempt to bring them to repent and turn back to him. At least some of the people refuse to do so, and instead respond by mistreating severely and eventually killing the servant, thus committing a grave injustice.<sup>62</sup> Many of the people, however, including perhaps even some who had participated in the mistreatment

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60. In this regard, Harry M. Orlinsky comments that “the innocent prophet suffered because of his unpopular mission. And when the people were made whole again, when their wounds were healed, it was only because the prophet had come and suffered to bring them God's message of rebuke and repentance” (*The So-Called “Servant of the Lord” and “Suffering Servant” in Second Isaiah*, VTSup 14 [Leiden: Brill, 1967], 57).

61. On the traditions regarding the persecution and killing of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures and early Jewish literature, see Orlinsky, *So-Called “Servant”*, 56-57; Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christians: History and Polemics, 30-150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 21; Betsy Halpern Amaru, “The Killing of the Prophets: Unraveling a Midrash,” *HUCA* 54 (1983): 153-80.

62. This idea runs throughout the parable of the wicked tenants that the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas attribute to Jesus (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12;



and murder of the servant, do come to acknowledge their sin, repent of it, and turn back to God in obedience.<sup>63</sup> As a result, they are able to experience peace, healing, and wholeness.

The claim that God himself inflicted pain and suffering on the servant, perhaps bringing upon him some type of ailment, disease, or infirmity that severely disfigured or marred him, would naturally have been understood on the basis of these same ideas in Paul's day. Although the sinful people themselves would be seen as directly responsible for the wounds, bruises, afflictions, and death of the servant,<sup>64</sup> God could be said to have inflicted pain and suffering on the servant *indirectly* both by sending him into the midst of a sinful and violent people, knowing that they would mistreat him harshly and perhaps even kill him, and also *by insisting that the servant remain there*, in spite of the abuse, afflictions, and violent death that the servant would endure as a result of his continuing to carry out his prophetic ministry in their midst. While the people were responsible for the servant's sufferings and violent death, in a sense God was also responsible in that he willed that the servant persist in carrying out his prophetic work among the people, attempting to bring them to abandon their sinful ways and return to God, in spite of the bloody consequences of that work.

In that case, what would have led many of the people to recognize their sin, repent of it, and change their ways was *that which they observed* in the servant. Independently of the extent to which God or the people themselves were responsible for what the servant endured, it was the people's contemplation of the bruised, battered, bloody, and disfigured servant and the unjust things done to him that brought them to repent and turn back to God. As the passage emphasizes, however, it was not only their contemplation of the servant's revolting appearance that impacted the sinful people but the servant's willingness to endure such abuse and mistreatment patiently without protesting or lashing out at those who did him harm. According to the passage, what impressed the people was the servant's perseverance and the meekness he displayed while being subjected to violence and abuse. Rather than wishing his tormentors evil or asking God to punish them, he

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Luke 20:9-19; Gos. Thom. 65-66). It is therefore very possible that it formed part of the Jesus-tradition known to Paul.

63. David A. Sapp finds this idea especially in the LXX version of Isaiah 53: "His sufferings bring them back to their senses, for his sufferings convict them of their sins" ("The LXX, 1QIsa, and MT Versions of Isaiah 53 and the Christian Doctrine of Atonement," in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger Jr. and William R. Farmer [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998], 170-92 [186]).

64. John Goldingay and David Payne rightly stress: "Verses 7-9 make it quite explicit that the suffering the vision describes is humanly wrought" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, ICC [London: T & T Clark, 2006], 2:309).

not only interceded for them but even went so far as to offer up his life to God on their behalf as they put him to death, imploring God to forgive them their sins and wickedness. This perseverance, meekness, patience, and commitment to serving others in spite of the abuse and violence he endured at their hands would be seen as an expression of great love for the people. In faithfulness and obedience to God and out of love even for those who did him harm, the servant chose to remain in the midst of the sinful people due to his desire that they might be brought back to God through his efforts and willingly embraced the terrible consequences of those efforts. In essence, this involved making himself a sin-offering on their behalf, since he offered his life up to God interceding for the people, asking that God might forgive them (53:10, 12).<sup>65</sup> It was therefore the love of the servant for the people and his commitment to bringing them to put away their sinful behavior so as to turn back to God that led to the people's peace, healing, and justification.<sup>66</sup> Through the servant's patient endurance of the mistreatment and violence inflicted on him, the people were delivered from a way of life that had made that peace, healing, and justification impossible.

On the basis of this interpretation of the passage, the affirmations that the servant bore the sins, iniquities, and transgressions of the people would have been understood in several different ways. First, the servant patiently bore sins, iniquities, and transgressions that were unjustly committed *against* him. Second, he bore the people's sins by taking upon himself the task and responsibility of bringing them to leave those sins behind and instead live in the way that God commanded and desired for their own good. Of course, because God willed and ordered the servant to persevere in his prophetic work among the sinful people despite the gruesome and bloody consequences to which that perseverance led, the servant would also be regarded as having endured the chastisement of God that was aimed at correcting, not *him*, but *the people*, as the passage affirms (53:5). Nevertheless, while it might be said that the servant had suffered at God's hands what the people deserved to suffer as chastisements for their sins and did so in their place, it was *not his suffering itself* that led to peace, healing, and justification for

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65. The intercession of the servant figure is especially stressed in *Targum Isaiah*; see Jostein Ådna, "The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 189–224.

66. As Goldingay and Payne observe with regard to the LXX version of Isaiah 53, "the passage's concern throughout is with the servant in connection with his ministry, and thus the implications of this ministry for other people. . . . Through his ministry the people will grow and flourish, and thus Yhwh's plan will be fulfilled" (*Isaiah 40–55*, 322).

the sinful people. Rather, these things resulted from *the way in which the servant reacted to that suffering*, with love, patience, and steadfast perseverance to his God-given task and without complaining, protesting, or raising his voice, as well as from the impression that the servant's patient endurance and steadfast love for the sinful people in the midst of the sufferings they inflicted on him produced in them. And third, by interceding for the people as he went to his death, the servant had borne the people's sins and transgressions in the sense that he had sought that God forgive them those sins and transgressions. The basis for that forgiveness, however, would not be the servant's death per se, but the change that would take place in the people as a result of the servant's commitment and dedication to bringing them to turn back to God, even to the point of dying for that objective.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than looking to the notion of penal substitution, therefore, which was just as foreign to the thought of Paul as it was to the Hebrew Scriptures and Second Temple Judaism, if Paul had seen Isaiah 53 as foretelling what would take place in Jesus' death, he would almost certainly have understood the passage on the basis of ideas such as those just mentioned, all of which are contained or implied in the passage itself. Out of love for others, Jesus had patiently endured the abuse and violence inflicted on him by others as he carried out his God-given task of bringing others to leave behind their sinful ways and live in his same love as members of a community characterized by that love. Like the servant of Isaiah 53, when Jesus had been threatened with a violent death, rather than seeking to save himself from such a death by abandoning his work on their behalf, he had patiently and steadfastly persevered in that work in an attempt to bring others back to the God he proclaimed. As a result, he too had been beaten, bruised, and killed. Because God had willed that Jesus remain in the context into which God had sent him and had willed that he continue to carry out his work there in spite of the violent consequences, it would be said that Jesus had been obedient to God to the end and also that God had handed his Son over to death out of love for others rather than sparing him the death of the cross.<sup>68</sup>

Such an understanding of Jesus' death would also have led Paul and other believers to affirm that Jesus had died for the sins and transgressions of others, as the servant of Isaiah 53 had, but in the same sense that the servant is there said to have done.<sup>69</sup> He had patiently borne the sins and transgressions that sinful human beings had committed against him, yet he had also died for their sins and transgressions in the sense that he had taken

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67. R. N. Whybray rightly notes that "the phrase 'bear sin' (*nāsā' hāt'*), which occurs almost exclusively in the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, always refers to a person's responsibility for his own sin, and is never used in connexion with atoning sacrifice" (*Isaiah 40-66*, NCB [London: Oliphants, 1975], 183).

68. See Rom 4:24-25; 5:19; 8:32; Phil 2:7-8.

69. See Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; Gal 1:4.

it upon himself to bring them to leave behind those sins and transgressions. His suffering and death had been the result of his commitment to that task. Of course, by bringing them to leave behind their sins and transgressions, through his faithfulness and obedience unto death he had also made it possible for them to be saved from God's wrath at those sins and transgressions. While Paul never speaks of Jesus interceding for others in his death in the way that the servant of Isaiah 53 was said to have done, it is likely that he believed that Jesus had gone to his death asking that God forgive and accept all those who would come to live under him as their Lord. At the very least, Paul would have seen Jesus' death as an implicit petition for God's forgiveness and acceptance of all who would live as his followers. While Paul speaks of Jesus interceding on behalf of believers from heaven in Rom 8:34, he does not specify whether the content of that intercession is that God forgive believers their sins or also that God act in other ways on their behalf. Paul probably would have seen Jesus' intercession as embracing both of these things and no doubt believed that Jesus had sought the same things from God in prayer throughout his life and up to the moment of his death.

If Paul understood Isaiah 53 and Jesus' death on the basis of all of these ideas, he may also have had Isaiah 53 in mind in other passages in which he speaks of Jesus' death. Among these may have been Rom 5:6-10, already mentioned above. Just as God had manifested his love for the sinful people of whom Isaiah 53 speaks by sending his servant into their midst and having him remain there despite the abuse and violence he endured so that the people might be brought to abandon their sinful ways and return to God, so God had manifested his love for those who were living as his enemies by having his Son persist in his ministry on their behalf, even at the cost of his life, so that they might leave behind their enmity and be reconciled to him. Even while they were sinners, therefore, Christ had died for them in the sense that he had given up his life so that they might be brought back to God as a result of all that he had done and would continue to do on their behalf. Through his blood—that is, his unbending commitment to that objective, even to the point of pouring out his life—he had brought those who had been God's enemies to live under himself in righteousness so as now to be justified by God and to be at peace with him (Rom 5:1, 9-10). His act of righteousness and his obedience had therefore led to the justification of many, not because his death in itself led God to justify anyone, but because his dedication all the way to his death to the task of bringing others to live in righteousness had now made it possible for people everywhere to be justified by God by living under him as members of the community that called him Lord (Rom 5:18-19). He had "died for all" in the sense that he had given up his life as a result of his commitment to bringing others to "live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for



them,” thus living in the same way that he had (2 Cor 5:14-15). God had “made him sin” by handing him over to death as if he were a sinner, since only by handing him over rather than sparing him such a death could God hope to bring human beings to practice his righteousness by living in the same type of love (2 Cor 5:21).

### *The Exaltation of Christ as Lord and the Love of God in Christ*

Although throughout his epistles Paul repeatedly alludes to the love of both God and Christ, his most extensive treatment of that subject is found in Rom 8:31-39. There he describes the love of God and Christ as something that can never be overcome and affirms that nothing can ever separate believers from that love. It is a love that gives of itself entirely and holds nothing back, not even one’s Son (v. 32). According to Paul, if God loves human beings so much that he was willing to hand his Son over to death so that they might live in that same love as his own, no one can doubt that God will continue to “give us all things with him.” It is this same love that Paul has in mind when he affirms that no type of tribulation, distress, persecution, or other hardships can ever separate believers from the love of Christ, and that neither death, nor life, nor the present, nor the past, nor spiritual powers, nor earthly powers can ever separate believers from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus their Lord (vv. 35-39). The idea that Jesus sought to be exalted to God’s side so that he might continue to seek the salvation and well-being of others from there is implicit in Paul’s allusion to Jesus’ intercession on behalf of others in v. 34 of this passage. Because that intercession is an act of love on Jesus’ part, it might be said that in Paul’s thought Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation allowed his love to be made perpetual and eternal. That same love will bring him to subject all things to God some day so that God may be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). For that reason, according to Paul, believers will never be separated from the love of God and Christ.

While Paul does not refer explicitly to the love of God or Christ in Phil 2:1-11, there can be little doubt that throughout the passage he has in mind the love of Christ, and probably that of God as well. There he writes:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation of love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being united in the same mind, sharing the same love, being of the same spirit, and thinking in the same way. Let nothing you do arise from selfishness or vanity, but in humility look upon others as having priority over yourselves. Let each of you consider not your own interests but those of others. Have among yourselves the same way of thinking that was reflected in Christ Jesus: even though he existed in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something worth clinging to adamantly, but instead he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and coming to exist in the same manner as other human beings; and being found in human form, he

humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. For that reason, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Perhaps more than any other passage in Paul's epistles, this passage explains what Paul means when he affirms that Jesus died or gave up his life for others, in spite of the fact that such an affirmation does not appear in the passage itself. For Paul, Jesus had given up his life in obedience to his Father precisely so that the type of community that Paul describes at the outset of this passage might become a reality. That kind of community could be brought into existence only if Jesus himself was willing to give up his life in obedience to his Father. Of course, it was not only God's will but that of Jesus himself that had led him to give up his life, since he would hardly have given up his life for others had he himself not loved others in the way Paul describes. As the Philippian believers were now to do, Jesus had considered others to be of the highest importance and had valued their well-being and wholeness more than he did his own life. Because this is precisely the way in which his Father wanted him to think, and because his Father wanted him to give himself to and for others to the very end, by thinking in this way and giving of himself fully, Jesus was being obedient to his Father up to the very end.

According to Paul (or the hymn he is citing here), God responded to Jesus' obedience by exalting him as Lord over all. The conjunction used in Greek (*dio*) indicates that Jesus' obedience to the cross was the *reason* why God exalted him.<sup>70</sup> It is extremely important to grasp the connection that exists in Paul's thought between Jesus' death and his exaltation by God as Lord. From Paul's perspective, it would be totally incoherent for Jesus in his present, exalted condition as Lord simply to desire to be acclaimed, honored, and glorified for his own sake. In that case, what he would have been seeking all along was to attain a position above all others in order to exert his dominance over them and gain their adulation and obeisance by

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70. Michael Wade Martin and Bryan A. Nash have argued that, in contrast to Greek hymns about the gods and other exalted figures, Phil 2:6-11 is "subversive" and "startling" in that it "praises Christ neither for having high descent nor for overcoming low descent, but rather for exchanging high for low descent," thus moving "in the opposite direction" from the gods and figures generally extolled in Greco-Roman literature ("Philippians 2:6-11 as Subversive *Hymnos*: A Study in the Light of Ancient Rhetorical Theory," *JTS* 66 [2015]: 90-138 [110, 118]). In addition, the hymn points to Christ's "scandalously shameful" death as "a source of praise" (127). Thus "Christ is praised for taking up what under each topos was conventionally considered shameful, and in place of what was considered honourable. His selfless motive for doing so, moreover, is implied throughout and seems to be the source of the unconventional praise. . . . At every turn, stations of shame are refurbished as stations of honour because they were taken up selflessly, in service to others, by one 'existing in the form of God'" (135).

subjecting them to himself. In other words, Jesus would have gone to the cross, *not for the sake of others out of love for them*, but *moved and motivated entirely by self-interest*. Yet this is precisely what Paul says did *not* happen. Paul could not look to Jesus and his death on the cross to exhort others to do nothing from selfishness or a desire to satisfy their own interests over against those of others if he believed that ultimately that was what Jesus himself had sought. Nor could Paul have had the concept of God that he articulates here had he thought in those terms. A God who would exalt his Son simply because he wanted to be Lord over others for his own sake and for that reason was willing to pay any price—including the cross—to get what he wanted would not be a God of love. He would be a God just like his Son, perhaps even willing to suffer, as long as he got something for himself in exchange. His ultimate goal would have been simply to be acclaimed, adulated, revered, and worshiped. Such a God would never be truly *loved*, however, because from the start he would have been seeking only his own selfish interests rather than those of others, out of a desire to establish his dominion over them. The same would be said of his Son. Paul can only exhort believers to seek the interests of others rather than their own because he proclaims a God who does the same, together with his Son, no matter how great the cost.

If we work backwards from Paul's allusion to Jesus' exaltation as Lord over all in this passage, we can comprehend more clearly Paul's understanding of the salvific significance of Jesus' death. According to Paul, what Jesus sought, and what God sought through him, was not simply the exaltation of *Jesus* but the exaltation of *the love of God in Christ Jesus* of which Paul speaks in Rom 8:31-39. In Paul's thought, everything that God has done and continues to do through Christ was designed to bring about that same love in human beings. If what God sought from the very beginning was that all might come to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29), then this must have been what God was seeking and contemplating from even before the time in which he sent his Son (Gal 4:6). Christ himself must also have been seeking that same objective when he emptied himself and took the lowliest form of human being imaginable in antiquity, namely, the form of a slave, and subsequently died the most horrific type of death that existed, death on a cross, which was a death reserved primarily for slaves. Just as importantly, however, in Paul's mind Jesus must have been seeking all of these things not only at the moment of his death but throughout his ministry and up until his very last breath. His objective from the very beginning had been to see the lives of all people transformed by that same kind of love and self-emptying, because it alone could fill them with joy and make them whole.

All of this makes it clear why in Paul's thought the salvation that God sought for all is brought about by means of Christ and the cross rather than

by means of the Mosaic law. It is not through the law but through Christ and his cross that the kind of love of which Paul speaks in Phil 2:1-11 and elsewhere in his epistles becomes a reality in the lives of those who come to faith in Christ. From Paul's perspective, the Mosaic law with its commandments, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments could never have produced in human beings of all nations the same type of love that God now brings about in them everywhere through Christ. At the same time, of course, God acts to save human beings not only through Christ but also through those such as Paul who reach out to others in the same love so that they might come to live under the crucified Christ as their risen Lord. The love of those who proclaim the gospel to others in word and deed, as well as their willingness to give their life for that gospel and all that it represents, is just as indispensable to the establishment of the community brought into existence through Christ as the love for others that Christ himself manifested in life and death. Yet rather than constituting a love of their own that is separate and distinct from the love of God and Christ, the love of those such as Paul who dedicate their lives to serving others is the love of God himself poured into their hearts, as well as the love of Christ, which has taken control of the lives of believers so as to constrain them to live and love in the same way that Christ did (Rom 5:5; 2 Cor 5:14).