

What Did Jesus Accomplish on the Cross?

Vintage Jesus, week 3

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... this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

— 1 John 4:10 (ESV)

Having established that Jesus Christ is the only God in the first week of this series, and that He was also fully human in the second week of this series, we will now examine what Jesus accomplished through His death on the cross.

Crucifixion was invented by the Persians around 500 BC, perfected by the Romans in the days of Jesus, and not outlawed until the Emperor Constantine, who ruled Rome in the fourth century AD. In the days of Jesus, crucifixion was reserved for the most horrendous criminals and even the worst Romans were beheaded rather than crucified.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus called crucifixion “the most wretched of deaths.” The ancient Greek philosopher Cicero asked that decent Roman citizens not even speak of the cross because it was too disgraceful a subject for decent people.

Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, Nazi soldiers crucified Jews at Dachau by running bayonets and knives through their legs, shoulders, throats, and testicles. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge also performed crucifixions in Cambodia. Today, crucifixion continues in Sudan and online with the multiplayer video game called *Roma Victor*.

Perhaps most peculiar is the fact that the symbol for Jesus, the most famous symbol in all of history, is the cross. Beginning with the church father Tertullian, early Christians made the sign of the cross over their bodies and adorned their necks and homes with crosses to celebrate the brutal death of Jesus. In our day, the equivalent would be an AIDS-infected drug needle or used condom becoming the world’s most beloved symbol, adorning homes, churches, and bodies.

How can Christians celebrate the crucifixion of Jesus as good news—the best news they have ever heard? To answer this question we must move from the historical fact of Jesus’ death to the theological meaning of that fact. To accomplish this we must examine the most succinct summary of the gospel in Scripture: “that Christ died *for* our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3b–4, emphasis added). Here the word “for” in theological terms means Jesus’ death was substitutionary, or vicarious, and in our place solely for our benefit and without benefit for Himself. Scripture repeatedly stresses this point, which theologians call *penal substitution*:

- Isaiah 53:12 . . . *he [Jesus] poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*
- Romans 5:8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

- 1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ died **for** sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*
- 1 John 2:2 *He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice **for** our sins . . .*

To better understand this good news we must turn to the Old Testament, which prepared people for the coming of Jesus. Among the central events in the Old Testament is the act of atonement, including the annual celebration of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), according to the regulations of the book of Leviticus. On that day, two healthy goats without defect would be chosen; they were fit to represent sinless perfection. The high priest, acting as the representative and mediator between the sinful people and their holy God, would take one goat and lay his hands on the animal while confessing the sins of the people. He would then slaughter that goat, which acted as a substitute for the sinners who rightly deserved a violent, bloody death for their many sins.

The slaughter of this goat shows what the Bible calls *propitiation*, or turning the outpouring of God's wrath (which is mentioned more than 600 times in Scripture) on Jesus instead of us. He substituted Himself in our place as both our High Priest and the "lamb of God" to pay the penalty for our sins as evidence of His great love for both God's holiness and us sinners (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). Scripture speaks of both God's wrath and Jesus' propitiation in many places, including the following:

- Romans 5:9 . . . *we [are] saved from God's **wrath** through him [Jesus]!*
- 1 Thessalonians 1:10 . . . *Jesus, who rescues us from the coming **wrath**.*
- Romans 3:23–25 (ESV) . . . *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.*
- Hebrews 2:17 (ESV) *Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people.*
- 1 John 2:2 (ESV) *He [Jesus] is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*
- 1 John 4:10 (ESV) . . . *this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **propitiation** for our sins.*

The second goat, called the scapegoat, would then be sent away to run freely into the wilderness away from the sinners, symbolically taking their sins with it. All of this foreshadowed the coming of Jesus Christ, our High Priest (who mediates between unholy people and their holy God), sinless substitute (who died a bloody death in our place for our sins), and the scapegoat (who takes our sins away to be remembered by God no more).

Only by rightly understanding the function of the two goats is the atonement fully appreciated. Although there were two goats, there was only one slaughter for the propitiation of sin. The second goat was sent away with sin, showing the cleansing expiation from sin. This is spoken of throughout Scripture, in addition to many references to God's people wearing white:

- Leviticus 16:30 "*. . . on this day atonement will be made for you, to **cleanse** you. Then, before the LORD, you will be **clean** from all your sins.*"

- Jeremiah 33:8 *“I will **cleanse** them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me.”*
- Zechariah 13:1 *“On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to **cleanse** them from sin and impurity.”*
- 1 John 1:7–9 *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, **purifies** us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and **purify** us from all unrighteousness.*

In summary, Jesus has taken away sin through the cross so that we can be forgiven, reconciled to God and people, and enabled to live a new life by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new life is patterned after the life of Jesus because we have been cleansed from our sins and made new. Therefore, the answer to the question, “What did Jesus accomplish on the cross?” is that Jesus has loved us, forgiven us, cleansed us, changed us, and chosen to be with us forever.

Next week: Did Jesus rise from death?