

What Happened When Christ Died?

by David Stewart

In the first century, the act of crucifixion was a common occurrence in the Roman Empire. The Romans used this method of capital punishment to make a powerful statement to their subjects: This is what happens to those who defy authority and break the law. The site of crucifixions was often near a road where passersby might see the spectacle and be warned; Jesus' death occurred near a road entering Jerusalem (John 19:20). The sign placed above his head, "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matthew 27:37), was used to intimidate any who would challenge Roman domination. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded many crucifixions, especially during the revolt leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If crucifixion was so commonplace, then what is so significant about Jesus' death on a cross?

The crucifixion of Christ was a moment in history that has and will have repercussions throughout time into eternity. Many things happened that day which can potentially revolutionize our relationship with God and with other people.

1) An innocent man was put to death. From a legal standpoint, the crucifixion of Jesus was a great injustice. The death penalty is a legitimate form of executing justice (Genesis 9:6). Fear of such a punishment can serve as a deterrent against murder and other crimes. After all, ruling authorities do "not bear the sword for nothing" (Romans 13:4). However, Jesus had committed no crime. One of the criminals crucified next to him recognized this tragic mistake and said, "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

The Jewish leaders who clamored for Jesus' death were not allowed the right to carry out the death penalty themselves (John 18:31). Therefore, they had taken Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, seeking his judgment against the one called "Christ." After questioning Jesus, Pilate repeatedly told the Jews, "I find no basis for a charge against him" (John 18:38; 19:4, 6). Nevertheless, due to political pressure, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified (John 19:16).

Many people throughout the course of history have been unjustly put to death for crimes they did not commit. However, the case of Jesus towers above any other injustice ever done. Not only was he innocent of any crime worthy of death, but he also had never sinned! The perfection of Jesus is frequently stated in the New Testament. For example, the author of Hebrews wrote, "We have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The apostle John succinctly wrote, "And in him is no sin" (1 John 3:5). When Christ died, an innocent and sinless man was put to death.

2) God's eternal plan to save man was fulfilled. Even though Jesus was crucified by wicked men, there is a divine element in his death to be considered. This fact does not excuse or pardon those

who killed Jesus. Rather, it demonstrates how God can utilize even the vilest of sinners to carry out his perfect will. Peter expressed this concept in his sermon at Pentecost: “This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). The sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus, was planned before the creation of the world (Ephesians 3:10, 11). Throughout Old Testament history, God made promises about the coming Messiah. When the time was right, he sent Jesus into the world (Galatians 4:4). Throughout his ministry, Jesus emphasized that he had come to do the Father’s will. When his time had arrived, Jesus went to the cross to die (John 13:1). After enduring the crucifixion for six hours, he gasped for his last few breaths and uttered these triumphant words: “It is finished” (John 19:30). God’s marvelous plan was done.

3) *Jesus bore the sins of the world.* The death of Christ on the cross was a sacrifice. From earliest times, men brought animal sacrifices to God (Genesis 4:4; 8:20); and such sacrifices were later required from the Israelites by the covenant God established with them (Leviticus 1—7). The one sacrifice that is particularly relevant is the sin offering in which an animal (a bull, goat, or ram) without defect was put to death because of individual or community sin (Leviticus 4:1—6:7). The animal became the victim and bore the consequences of the people’s sin. The blood of the animal was often smeared on the horns of the altar and poured out at its base.

When Jesus was crucified, he became the greatest sacrifice ever to be given and did away with the need for offering animal sacrifices (Hebrews 9:11—10:31). His back was flogged, his head was crowned with thorns, his hands and feet were nailed to the cross, and his side was pierced with a spear. Those wounds brought forth blood—the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Jesus willingly offered himself as the sacrificial Lamb without defect: “He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. . . . He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree [cross], so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:22-24).

4) *Jesus appeased the wrath of God.* When Christ died, God’s grace and holiness met in full force. God is holy and just; he must punish those who do evil. God is also gracious and merciful; he longs to forgive those who disobey him. Because of our sins, we all deserve to be eternally separated from God (Romans 6:23). In God’s wisdom and love, however, he sent Jesus to become a substitute for us: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The wrath of God which punishes sin was laid on Jesus, the sinless one, as he died.

The separation of Jesus from his Father is implied from some details of the crucifixion. There was darkness for three of the six hours Christ hung on the cross. In the midst of that blackened sky, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Therefore, the apostle John could write, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2). The term “atoning sacrifice” or “propitiation” (NASB) literally means “the one who turns aside God’s wrath.” Those

who are obedient to Christ will not have to face God's holy anger. However, the ones who do not obey the gospel of Christ must pay for their own sins: "Whoever rejects ['disobeys,' NASB] the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36; see 2 Thessalonians 1:8).

5) *Jesus fulfilled the law of Moses.* Christ made it clear that he came to fulfill the demands of the Law (Matthew 5:17). He faithfully obeyed God throughout his lifetime. He was tempted but never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5). His perfect sacrifice took place to supersede all other sacrifices. As Jesus gave up his spirit to God on the cross, an amazing thing happened: "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). This divine action symbolized "the beginning of the end" of the old covenant. Since Christ fulfilled the Law given to Moses, it is no longer a barrier between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14-16). All people can be one in Christ.

6) *Jesus gave us a new approach to God.* In Jesus' death, he gave us a new way to come to the Father. We come through Jesus for our salvation. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The apostle Peter proclaimed, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus serves as our great high priest who sits at the right hand of the Father. We come through him to God in prayer to boldly ask for the things we need (Hebrews 4:14-16; see John 14:13, 14). Through Jesus, we can offer up spiritual worship that is truly pleasing to the Father (John 4:23, 24).

7) *Jesus gave us the power of resurrection.* The story of Christ did not end with his death on the cross. He was buried in a tomb, and on the third day he was raised from the dead (Matthew 28:1-7). This "resurrection power" was evident prior to Jesus' own resurrection. During his ministry, he raised people from the dead (Mark 5:21-43; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44). Even at the time of his crucifixion, that power was released: "The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life" (Matthew 27:51, 52). Because of Jesus' power over death, we may have hope of a resurrection body and eternal life (John 5:24-30; 1 Corinthians 15)!

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