

## The Meaning of Jesus' Death

Crucifixion was a common form of execution in the ancient world, and the Roman Empire was notorious for conducting mass crucifixions. For example, after the Third Servile War (73–71 BC, the slave rebellion under Spartacus), the Roman general Crassus crucified 6,000 of Spartacus' men near Rome. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that when the Romans were besieging Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Roman general Titus crucified five hundred or more Jews every day. In fact, so many Jews were crucified outside of the walls that "there was not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies" (*Wars of the Jews* 5:11.1).<sup>1</sup>

The Roman statesman Cicero called crucifixion "the most cruel and disgusting penalty." Josephus, who witnessed crucifixions himself, called it "the most wretched of deaths." The Roman jurist Julius Paulus listed crucifixion as the worst of all capital punishments. The ancients considered death by crucifixion to be the most obscene, the most disgraceful, and the most horrific execution known to man.

Jesus' death is no doubt the most famous example of crucifixion, but he was just one of the thousands of people the Romans crucified around that time.

The average person, I suppose, seeing Jesus die on the cross might have thought, "Well, here is another criminal the Roman Empire is putting to death." Not all that unusual; happens all the time.

Why then is the death of Jesus any different from all the other executions by crucifixion? What is the significance of his death? What sets his death apart from all the others? It happened nearly 2000 years ago; why are we still talking about it today and remembering it regularly throughout the year?

The Bible tells us that Jesus' death was unique and special. Much more was going on at his death than at any other crucifixion. Anyone could see that Jesus died on the cross, but we might not be aware of the meaning/significance of his death.

This is important because your eternal destiny depends on believing what the Bible says about Jesus' death.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard P. Bucher, "Crucifixion in the Ancient World," [www.orlutheran.com/html/crucify.html](http://www.orlutheran.com/html/crucify.html)

Jesus' death on the cross was unique and meaningful for a number of reasons.

I. Jesus' death was meaningful because it was the culmination of God's eternal plan.

A. God has a plan for everyone, but God's plan for Jesus was much different from His plan for everyone else.

1. In the mind of God, the plan for Jesus' crucifixion existed "from the foundation of the earth" (Rev 13:8). Before creation, God already had this all planned out.

2. Gen 3:15 is the earliest hint in the OT of what this plan would include. Immediately after man's fall into sin, God revealed that he would provide a solution to human sin.

*Gen 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

It's rather cryptic language, but it foretells Jesus' death.

3. We have other hints throughout the OT.

a) *Ps 22:16, 18 For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. ... They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.*

b) *Isa 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

Prophecies like those, and many others, foretell Jesus' death.

4. During Jesus' life, we see many references to God's timetable. God's plan was moving forward; Jesus was fulfilling that plan.

*John 12:27 But for this purpose I came to this hour.*

*John 17:1 Father, the hour has come.*

Everything that Jesus did followed God's timing.

- B. Jesus frequently mentioned how he was following God's plan as given in Scripture.

Matthew 26:54 *How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?*

Luke 24:44-46 *...all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled...*

There was a divine necessity in Jesus' actions. It was necessary for him to fulfill the plan of God.

- C. Many of the details of Jesus' death were the subject of prophecies. These OT prophecies foretold that...

1. His death would include the shedding of blood.
2. He would be killed outside the city walls.
3. He would die with criminals.
4. His appearance would be greatly marred.
5. He would be buried in a rich man's tomb.

The OT gives us many hints about how Jesus would die. Only God could orchestrate all the details that needed to come together at the right place and the right time to fulfill this plan.

- D. Jesus was obedient to God's will/plan.

Matthew 26:38-39 *If it be possible let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.*

Hebrews 10:5-7 *Behold I have come...to do thy will O God.*

**Trans:** What happened to Jesus was not bad luck; he was not the victim of circumstance. Jesus was not merely another one of the thousands of criminals and rebels that Rome put to death. His death was not merely the result of a political and religious conspiracy.

Jesus' death was the culmination of a very special plan that God had made in eternity past. All the details of this plan had to be worked out in time and according to Scripture. When the right time came, Jesus fulfilled the plan by voluntarily dying on the cross.

Jesus' death was meaningful in that it was the culmination of God's eternal plan.

- II. Jesus' death was meaningful because He was the Son of God.
  - A. Jesus was similar to many of those that the Romans put to death. He was considered a trouble-maker, a rebel, perhaps a threat to the Roman authorities.
  - B. But Jesus was not like any other person ever crucified. No other person like him had ever lived. It's because of who Jesus is that his death was meaningful to us. Who was Jesus?
    1. Jesus was God in the flesh.
      - a) We find many indications throughout the Bible that Jesus is equally and essentially God. E.g., John 1:1
      - b) For Jesus' death to be uniquely meaningful, he had to be more than merely human. For Jesus to pay the penalty for man's sin, he had to be God.
      - c) As God, Jesus could take on man's sin and die as a perfect sacrifice. No mere human could do that.
      - d) So God himself, in the person of Christ, paid the penalty for man's sin. God paid what God required.
      - e) Jesus' sacrificial death had infinite value because he is God in the flesh.
    2. Jesus was human.
      - a) Just as we have many indications throughout the Bible that Jesus was God, we also find that he is human.
      - b) He had all the attributes of genuine humanity.
      - c) He had to be genuinely human to die for humans.

Php 2:7 *[Jesus] took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men....*

- C. However, had Jesus been the very same as every other human, his death may have been a tragedy, but nothing more. Jesus' death has significance because of who he is—both God and man.

**Quote:** What was significant about the death of Jesus was not the methods of torture or the physical anguish experienced, but the person who experienced the suffering. Jesus' death upon Golgotha's cross was different from every other such death because Jesus was different from every other man.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Jesus was the God-man gives his death special meaning.

III. Jesus death was meaningful because it was substitutionary.

Before considering his death, we should recognize that...

- A. Jesus' *life* was substitutionary. We don't often appreciate the fact that Jesus lived for us as well as died for us.

1. The Bible tells us that Jesus fulfilled the law. He was "without sin" (Heb 4:15) and "did no sin" (1 Pet 2:22). What made Jesus' death valuable was the fact that Jesus led a perfect life.

*Mt 5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.*

Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly, without ever breaking one part of it.

2. Theologians sometimes refer to Jesus' perfect keeping of the law as his active obedience.

- B. Jesus' *death* was substitutionary.

1. Unlike all the others who were crucified, Jesus didn't die for his own crimes or sins. In fact, he had to be free from sin in order to take our sins upon himself. He had to be a perfect sacrifice. Had Jesus been sinful, his death would have had no particular value for us.

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<sup>2</sup> Williquette, "The Passion of Christ: It's True Significance."

2. Jesus was not guilty of the charges the Jews brought against him. Pilate stated several times that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. Pilate allowed Jesus to be crucified in spite of his innocence.
3. Jesus' crucifixion is a case of an absolutely innocent person dying on behalf of others. That is unique; it's never happened before or since.

*Isa 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

*Rom 5:6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.*

*1Cor 15:3 ... Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.*

*Heb 9:28 Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many...*

4. Jesus' death involved a substitution of the righteous for the unrighteous. Jesus became a voluntary substitute for sinners and suffered the punishment of sin in their place.
5. Both the law-keeping perfection of Jesus' life and the penalty-paying value of Jesus' death are credited to the believer at the point of salvation.

*2 Corinthians 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

**Trans:** Jesus' death was meaningful because it was substitutionary. He lived a perfect life that we never could live and he paid the penalty that we never could pay.

IV. Jesus' death was meaningful because it satisfied God's wrath against sin for believers.

A. The death of all those other people by crucifixion may have satisfied the Roman legal system, but it didn't take away anyone's sin.

B. Jesus' death was unique in that his death had the capacity to remove sin from others. Nobody else's death ever removed sin, either from themselves or from anyone else.

*Rom 5:11 we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.*

C. Jesus' death was an atonement. Atonement means "to satisfy" or "to remove." When we say that Jesus atoned for our sin, we mean that Jesus' sacrificial, substitutionary death on the cross was the payment for sin. Our sins are forgiven/removed because Jesus' death paid that penalty. "Jesus Paid It All."

D. Why was an atonement necessary? Why couldn't God simply forgive sin without a payment? Why is a payment necessary?

1. God is holy and just. If a sin is committed, God demands justice.

2. Sin is the violation of God's law. When we break the law, we deserve a penalty. If we break the rules, it is fair for us to be penalized.

**E.g.**, crime deserves to be punished, and if a human judge does not punish crime, we complain that he is unjust. Justice demands that crime be punished.

*Rom 6:23 the wages of sin is death.*

3. Starting from way back in Genesis, we find that God allowed a substitute to pay the penalty for sin. The life of an animal could be taken as a substitute that would pay for/satisfy God's wrath against sin.

*Lev 5:18 And he shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, ... as a trespass offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him ... and it shall be forgiven him.*

4. Remember that John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus was “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).
5. Jesus' death atones for/takes away sin for those who trust in him. It does not take away *everyone's* sin; only believers. You benefit from Jesus' atonement when you believe.
6. Another word for this is propitiation—to satisfy or turn aside wrath. Jesus paid the penalty, thus satisfying God's wrath against sin for believers.

Isa 53:11 *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and **shall be satisfied**: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.*

Rom 3:25 *God hath set forth [Jesus to be] a propitiation **through faith in his blood**, ...*

Heb 9:22 *Jesus put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*

**Trans:** Jesus' death is meaningful in that it was the means of satisfying God's wrath against sin.

We can do nothing personally to satisfy God's wrath against our sin. I.e., no religious rituals—baptism, confession, communion, confirmation, etc. We can't be good enough to appease the wrath of God. Only the death of Jesus is sufficient to do that, and it's only when we believe in Jesus that the atonement is applied to us personally.

**Question:** Is God satisfied regarding your sin? Has the atoning sacrifice of Christ been applied to your account? Can you say that you have received the atonement? If not, then you are still under God's wrath (cf. John 3:36; 3:18 “condemned already”).

- V. Jesus' death is meaningful because it is the basis of salvation.
- A. When we proclaim the Gospel message, "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved," we are saying that you must believe in the *person and work* of Christ to be saved. Part of Jesus' work was his death on the cross.
  - B. It's through the death of Christ that believers are saved. God accepts the believer on the basis of Jesus' death for him. Jesus paid the penalty, and now God is satisfied regarding the believer.
  - C. But you must have the value of Jesus death *applied* to yourself. You must claim Jesus' work personally; you must receive the atonement; you must believe and trust in Jesus' death to be saved.

John 1:12 *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name:*

- D. Saving faith goes beyond merely knowing the facts. We must agree personally with those facts and accept by faith Jesus perfect life and his sacrificial death. We must accept Jesus' final sacrifice for sin on our behalf.

Rom 6:23 *the gift of God is eternal life...*

When we turn from sin and accept the gift of eternal life, at that moment we experience salvation. If you haven't accepted the gift, then you have not experienced salvation.

Jesus death is meaningful because it is the means by which salvation comes to those who believe.

By the plan of God the Father, Jesus, God in human flesh, came to earth, lived a perfect life, took upon Himself man's sin and punishment, and died as a substitute for sinners.

How can you receive God's forgiveness? How can you secure a proper relationship with God through Jesus? Is it through religious activity such as baptism or communion? Is it the result of good works?

No; according to the Bible, it is through repentant faith in Jesus Christ that God grants forgiveness to sinners. You must repent of your sin and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You must turn away from your sinful direction and trust in Jesus as your Lord and as the one who took upon Himself your sin and punishment.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was crucified nearly 2000 years ago. While the *means* of his death was not unique, the *meaning* of his death was exceptional. No one, before or since, has died to pay for your sins. No one has satisfied God's wrath against sin by his death.

But you must receive the atonement. You must repent of your sin and believe the Gospel. It's only by faith that we have the atonement. If you've never done that, I urge you to do it today.

If you are already a believer, Jesus' death means that we don't live for ourselves, but for the one who died for us.

2Co 5:15 *[Jesus] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*

He died for us; we are now obligated to live for him.

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<sup>3</sup> Williquette.