

# **CHRIST'S WORK ON OUR BEHALF**

By Deb Garland

## **Introduction**

This article provides a helpful overview of Christ's work on the behalf of those who believe in Him. Key elements of His atoning work are summarized.

## **A Work of Reconciliation**

The atonement of Christ encapsulates both His death and resurrection leading to His ascension. The English word *atonement* comes from the two words “at” and “onement,” suggesting reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> God reconciling mankind to Himself through the death and resurrection of His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum summarizes what the atonement was all about when he writes, “All of Messiah’s sufferings and His death were to be substitutionary. He died so that we may have life. He died so that our sins may be removed from us. He died so that we may enter into a new relationship with God.” (Is. 52:13-53:12)<sup>2</sup>

## **Death by Crucifixion**

His death by crucifixion was by the decree (Gk. *boule*) and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). This meant God’s counsel was inflexible and predetermined.<sup>3</sup> Crucifixion in Jesus’ day was the punishment confined to slaves and malefactors of the worst class. Roman citizens were exempt. This form of execution was abolished by Constantine toward the end of his reign and was probably a result of his increasing reverence for the cross.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek word *stauros*, meaning cross, was a vertical stake firmly fixed in the ground. The *crux immissa* (Latin cross) with the upright beam projecting above the shorter crosspiece is the one that can be safely inferred that Jesus died upon as there was room for the inscription “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” made above His head.<sup>5</sup>

The Scriptures tell us that Christ was nailed to the cross by godless men, (Acts 2:23), shamefully put to death by crucifixion (Acts 3:15; 5:30; 10:39; cf. 13:28-29), and was the Righteous One murdered. (Acts 7:52)<sup>6</sup>

## **He Died as Predicted**

His death was declared by John the Baptist (John 1:29, 36) and discussed by Moses and Elijah at the time of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:31).<sup>7</sup> It was also prophesied to be a painful death, Psalm 22 depicting His sufferings. Ps. 22:1 prophesies Christ’s cry on the cross wherein He judicially bore the sins of the world (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Ps. 22:7 describes the passers-by who ridiculed Him (Matt. 27:39). Ps. 22:8 prophesies the actual words of those hurling insults at Him (Matt. 27:43). And Ps. 22:16 prophesies the piercing of Christ’s hands and feet (John 20:25), while Ps. 22:17 indicates that none of Christ’s bones would be broken (John 19:33-36). Ps. 22:18 prophesies the soldiers gambling for Christ’s clothes (John 19:24) and Ps. 22:24 prophesies Christ’s prayer to the Father concerning His impending death (Matt. 26:39; Heb. 5:7).

His death would also be a violent one. Isaiah 52 and 53 portrayed His future sufferings. Is. 52:14 describes the disfigurement of Christ as a result of His scourging (John 19:1) and Is. 53:5

prophesies the scourging and violent death of Christ (John 19:1, 18). Is. 53:7 prophesies the Messiah as a lamb—silent and obedient on the way to death (John 1:29).<sup>8</sup>

### **The Path to the Cross**

The Passion Week began with the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, which occurred six days before the Passover. The usual view is that Christ met with His disciples for their last supper together on Thursday night and delivered His Upper Room Discourse to them (John 13-16). Following His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane where angels strengthened Him as He wrestled in prayer in anticipation of His crucifixion (Luke 22:43), Jesus was tried before three Jewish and three Roman rulers. He was condemned to death and led to His crucifixion.<sup>9</sup>

Christ carried His cross to Calvary, but unable to bear it any further, Simon of Cyrene was given the task. Upon reaching Golgotha, meaning “place of the skull” (John 19:41-42), Christ was offered wine mingled with gall which would dull His sense (Matt. 27:33-34; Mark 15:22-23; Luke 23:33; John 19:17). After He refused this drink, He was immediately crucified along with two thieves on either side (Matt. 27:35-38; Mark 15:24-28; Luke 23:33-38; John 19:18-24).<sup>10</sup>

Jesus’ first cry on the cross was, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). As He hung on the cross, soldiers divided His garments and cast lots for His coat, thus fulfilling Scripture (Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-24). The chief priests and the scribes, as well as the people, mocked Jesus (Matt. 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-38).

One of the thieves believed on Him (Luke 23:39-43) upon which followed Jesus’ second cry on the cross, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). His third cry was to His mother, “Woman, behold thy son,” and to John, “Behold thy mother” (John 19:26-27). Then, there were three hours of darkness (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44) before His fourth cry was heard, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46-47; Mark 15:34-36) and His fifth cry, “I thirst” (John 19:28). Finally, Jesus’ uttered His sixth cry, “It is finished” (John 19:30) and His seventh cry, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). At this point, Jesus yielded up His spirit (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30).<sup>11</sup>

### **He Died in Our Place**

The New Testament tells us that Christ’s death was significant in that He died a substitutionary death on behalf of sinners. It was “one in place of another” or was *vicarious*. He representatively bore the punishment rightly due sinners by their guilt being imputed to Him. This follows the general idea of sacrifices in the Old Testament and is explicitly taught in the New Testament (John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pe. 2:24). In this way He accomplished salvation for those who put their trust in Him.<sup>12</sup>

Christ’s death also provided redemption. Scripture says, “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:20). The Greek word for “bought” is *agorazo* which brings to mind a slave being purchased in the ancient public slave market. Christ paid the price demanded by holy God for the deliverance of believers from the bondage and burden of sin (cf. 1 Cor. 7:23; Gal. 3:13; 4:5; Rev. 5:9; 14:3, 4).<sup>13</sup>

As a result of Christ’s death, God has reconciled man to Himself. Man’s status changes from condemnation to complete acceptability to God upon salvation. It is not merely to bring harmony between parties, but to elevate man to God’s moral standard. Romans 5:10 says, “For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being

reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” Man’s rebellion in the Garden of Eden brought enmity and hostility between himself and God. It is Christ’s death that brought estranged and alienated man back into fellowship with God resulting in peace. (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-20).<sup>14</sup> As Christ’s representatives, we now have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

### **His Death Satisfied God's Righteous Demands**

The death of Christ also provided propitiation, meaning that the satisfaction of all God’s righteous demands for judgment on the sinner were fully satisfied (Rom. 3:25). Faith in Him is the condition by which we avail ourselves of the propitiation. His blood is the price that was paid.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that apart from His humanity no blood could be shed, yet that blood is rendered exceedingly “precious” by the fact that it was the blood of one of the Godhead. God did not merely use the human Jesus as a sacrifice; God was in Christ as a reconciling agent (Heb. 10:4-10).<sup>16</sup>

Christ’s death provided the legal means by which God could forgive sin. Charges against the sinner were removed. God has forgiven all trespasses (Col. 2:13; cf. Matt. 6:12; 9:6; James 5:15; 1 John 1:9).<sup>17</sup>

Another result of Christ’s death is justification for the believing sinner. Based on a legal act, God the Judge declares the believing sinner righteous by the imputation of righteousness to him. Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” This means the removal of the believer’s sins and the bestowal of Christ’s righteousness upon the believer (cf. Rom. 3:24, 28; 5:9; Gal. 2:16).<sup>18</sup>

### **His Resurrection from the Dead**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the return of Christ to bodily life on earth on the third day after His death is the central truth of the Christian faith.<sup>19</sup> In John 11:25, Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” This is the fifth of Jesus’ great “I am” revelations. A believer’s death issues in new life. He will never die spiritually. He has eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 10:28) and the end of physical life is only a sleep for his body until the resurrection unto life. At death the spiritual part of a believer, his soul, goes to be with the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6, 8; Phil. 1:23).<sup>20</sup>

All of the Gospels (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20) stress the physical resurrection of Christ from the dead.<sup>21</sup> Not only that, Jesus’ birth was natural, but His conception was supernatural, and similarly, His death was natural, but His resurrection was supernatural.<sup>22</sup>

Christ was raised by the power of God, the Father (Eph. 1:19-20; Ps. 16:100, but Christ also had the power to raise Himself (John 10:18). And, the Holy Spirit also appears to be involved in effecting the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4; 8:11)<sup>23</sup>. Angels also were involved in announcing His resurrection (Matt. 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:4-7; John 20:12-13).<sup>24</sup>

It is this crucial event upon which Jesus’ entire life and death hinged, and it was His first step toward exaltation. His resurrection was predicted in Ps. 16:8-11 and fulfilled in Ps. 2:7 (Acts 2:22-32; 13:33-37) along with Jesus’ own predictions of His resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:19; 26:32; Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34; 14:28; Luke 9:22; 18:33; John 2:19).<sup>25</sup> He also specified that He would rise on the third day, a clear example of His omniscience.<sup>26</sup>

Let’s look more specifically at one of the above verses. Peter applies David’s hope of Ps. 16:10 to Christ in Acts 2:27-28 indicating that these verses prophesied that Christ would be resurrected

(Acts 2:24ff). This was not fulfilled by David because David died and was buried (Acts 2:29); instead, this passage spoke of the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:31; cf. Acts 13:35). And typologically, Ps. 22:22 is applied to Christ in Heb. 2:12 where, following the resurrection, Christ expresses praise for His resurrection.<sup>27</sup>

Overwhelming proof of the fact that Jesus did rise from the dead was given through the witness and testimony of a wide variety and number of people who in different circumstances saw the Lord after His resurrection. Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, offered as proof of his message the fact that they were witnesses of the resurrected Christ. He challenged his audience to ask around as the Resurrection had occurred less than two months before in the very same city where he was now preaching to them (Acts 2:32).<sup>28</sup>

Witnesses attended Christ's resurrection (Acts 10:40-41). The news of the resurrection of Christ began when the guards witnessed the angel rolling away the stone from the mouth of the tomb (Matt. 28:2-4). Next, the women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome and others came (Matt. 28:1, 5-7; Mark 16:1-11; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:1). Mary Magdalene ran to tell the apostles, the other women following more slowly (Matt. 28:8; Mark 16:8; Luke 24:8-10; John 20:2). She then returned with Peter and John and saw the empty tomb (John 20:2-10).

Now, after Peter and John had left, Mary Magdalene remained and saw the first appearance of Christ (John 20:11-17; cf. Mark 16:9-11). She returned to report the appearance of Christ (John 20:18). The other women returned and saw Christ too (Matt. 28:9-10). Now, the report of the guard watching the tomb occurs (Matt. 28:11-15).

In the afternoon, Peter sees Christ's third appearance (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5) and His fourth appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus toward evening (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35). Christ's fifth appearance is to the ten disciples, except Thomas, in the Upper Room (Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-23), His sixth appearance to the eleven, including Thomas, a week later (John 20:26-29), and His seventh appearance to the seven disciples just in from fishing in the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-23).

Christ appears to the apostles and five hundred in His eighth appearance (1 Cor. 15:6) and to James the Lord's brother in His ninth appearance (1 Cor. 15:7). James, not a believer before the resurrection (John 7:5) is included as a believer immediately following the resurrection (Acts 1:14; Gal. 1:19). The tenth appearance of Christ is to the eleven on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18) And, His eleventh appearance of Christ was in Jerusalem at the time of His ascension (Luke 24:44-55).<sup>29</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus Christ validates the Christian faith. "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins." Paul declared in 1 Cor. 15:17. It was also the guarantee of the Father's acceptance of the Son's work on the cross and that it was completed (Heb. 5:7). It was essential in the plan of God because Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit as a Helper for the disciples (John 16:7, but He could not come until Christ had departed. His resurrection fulfilled prophecy (Ps. 16:10; Matt. 16:21; Mark 14:28).<sup>30</sup>

The results of His resurrection meant that for the first time in history there was a new prototype body. He rose with a resurrection or eternal body, never to die again. Before that event, all resurrections were restorations to former earthly bodies. His resurrection body was different. He could enter closed rooms without opening doors (Luke 24:36; John 20:19), and He could appear and disappear at will (Luke 24:15; John 20:19).

His resurrection was also a proof of the claims He made, proving His truthfulness as a Prophet (Matt. 28:6), as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36) and that He was the Son of God (Rom. 1:4). It also was a prerequisite to all of His subsequent ministries. If Christ did not rise, then His life and ministry ended on the cross. However, due to His Resurrection and Ascension, His present and future ministries continue.<sup>31</sup>

Evidence for the resurrection can be found in the empty tomb. The disciples could not have stolen Jesus' body with Roman soldiers guarding it and it is unlikely the soldiers guarding the tomb would have been so fearful had they done so (Matt. 28:4). Instead, they fabricated a story of how the disciples had stolen the body, yet they could not produce the body as proof of their claims.

The shape of the linen wrappings was proof of Jesus' resurrection. John describes the scene. "Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie. And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself" (John 20:7-8). Peter noticed that the grave clothes were not all in a heap, but that the headpiece was neatly wrapped and deposited in a place by itself.

If the body had been removed, it was strange that the linen cloths were left behind, and even more strange that the napkin was so carefully arranged. The word "wrapped" is a verb used of the act of winding grave clothes about the body of Jesus before the burial (Matt. 27:59; Luke 23:53). It may signify that the head passed through the napkin, leaving it in its circular shape, or that Jesus deliberately folded it up before leaving the tomb.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Power of His Resurrection Appearances**

The appearances of the resurrected Christ in the forty days that followed the discovery of the empty tomb by so many people were evidence for His resurrection. (Matt. 28:1-10; Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

Another proof is in the fact that when the disciples saw Jesus after He was resurrected, they were completely changed. Peter in Acts 2 is quite different from Peter in John 19. Knowledge of the resurrection is what made the difference. Another change was that the disciples began to meet together in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week. (John 20:26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). And, of course, the existence of the church and its growth were dependent on the fact of the resurrection. (Acts 2:24-32; 3:15; 4:2).<sup>33</sup>

As a result, Christ's resurrection began to be proclaimed with great power (Acts 4:2, 10, 33) to Jews and Gentiles in fulfillment of prophecy (Acts 26:23).<sup>34</sup> His resurrection is also a harbinger, a signal indicating what is to come, of future judgment (Acts 17:31).<sup>35</sup> But most importantly, His bodily resurrection showed that Christ's finished work has overcome death, bringing hope and life to all who chose by faith to believe in Him (John 11:25-26).<sup>36</sup>

### **His Ascension to the Father**

Christ's ascension, His glorious withdrawal of His bodily presence, though not spiritual presence, from the earth and entrance as the God-man and mediatorial King into heaven occurred on the Mount of Olives forty days after His resurrection. This visible ascension of Christ was the necessary sequel and seal of His resurrection (Rom. 6:9) and the link between His humiliation and glorification (Phil. 2:5-11).<sup>37</sup>

His ascension was foretold in the Old Testament in Ps. 68:18 (cf. Eph. 4:8) and Ps. 110:1 (cf. Acts 2:34). Even Christ predicted His return to His Father (John 7:33; 14:12, 28; 16:5, 10, 28) and specifically His ascension (John 6:62; 20:17). And, it was written of in the New Testament (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 9:51; 24:49-53; Acts 1:6-11; Eph. 4:10; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:14; 1 Pe. 3:22).<sup>38</sup>

The ascension of Jesus Christ occurred “toward Bethany” (Luke 24:50), rather on the Bethany side of the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12). Acts 1:9 says, “And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.” It was a gradual, though not long, movement upward. Angels, too, attended His triumphal ascension to glory and promised the gazing disciples that Christ would return “in just the same way” as they had seen Him go into heaven (Acts 1:10-11). His return at His second coming would be visible, physical, and personal.<sup>39</sup>

The significance of the ascension is that it ended the earthly ministry of Christ and His self-limitation during the days of His life on earth. It also marked the end of the period of Christ’s humiliation and His entrance into the state of exaltation where His glory was no longer veiled following the ascension (John 17:5; Acts 9:3, 5). Christ is now exalted and enthroned in heaven.

And, it marked the first entrance of resurrected humanity into heaven and the start of a new work in heaven (Heb. 4:14-16; 6:20). Christ, a representative of the human race in a resurrected, glorified body where He intercedes for us. The ascension also made the descent of the Holy Spirit possible (John 16:7). It was essential for Christ to ascend to heaven in order that He could send the Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

The Holy Spirit made His first appearance on earth on the Day of Pentecost. “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

### **Appearances after His Ascension**

All appearances of Christ after His ascension, while actual appearances, differ in character from those which precede the ascension in that they correspond more to a vision and had less corporeal reality. There were six post-ascension appearances of Christ. Acts 7:55-56 regarding Stephen records, “But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”<sup>41</sup>

And Acts 9:3-5 describes the event Paul, formerly called Saul, experienced on the Damascus road, “And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven. And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” This event is also described in Acts 22:6-11 and Acts 26:13-18). Another post-ascension appearance to Paul in Arabia is somewhat conjectural (Acts 20:24; 26:17; Gal. 1:12-17), to Paul in the temple (Acts 9:26-30; 22:17-21), and to Paul in prison (Acts 23:11).

In Revelation 1:9-20, John gives his account of his vision of the Lord Jesus Christ on the isle of Patmos. In verse 18, Jesus tells him, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death."<sup>42</sup>

Upon the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ rests our Christian faith and our hope of life to come.

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