

“Four Days That Change Everything –

Day 1: The Power of the Crucifixion”

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And so Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, surrounded by a large crowd, shouting and laughing, joyous and hopeful. Not many days later, there will be another crowd, shouting not “Hosanna” but “Crucify.” Jesus will die a bloody, painful death – betrayed, abandoned, forsaken. At the time it happened, *nobody* understood its significance. Oh, there had been clues; Jesus had tried to tell his disciples several times; there were foreshadowing hints in the pages of the sacred scriptures. But nobody truly understood. People thought the light had gone out of the world, the forces of darkness had won, hope had been extinguished. They were wrong, of course. Easter would dawn fair and bright; the tomb would be empty; *God* would win. In time, the followers of Jesus came to understand the meaning of the cross. There’s a reason why we call that Friday *Good*. It’s the first of four days that change *everything*.

What I want to do this morning is explore what *happened* in the crucifixion. I don’t mean the gory details; I mean what it *accomplished*. What *difference* does it make for you, and for me?

To understand Good Friday, you need to understand the annual Jewish festival called the Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur. The holiest day in the Jewish year, occurring in late September or early October. It’s described in Leviticus 16 and some other places. You remember that Solomon had built a temple in Jerusalem, about a thousand years before Jesus. It was later destroyed and rebuilt. Jesus went there when he came to Jerusalem. In front of the temple was a large altar, where animals were sacrificed every day. Inside the temple was a room called the Holy of Holies. That’s where God’s presence was believed to reside. Only one person could ever enter the Holy of Holies, the High Priest, and he could only enter it one day a year – on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. He would take a young bull, and he would place his hands on the bull’s head, and he would confess all the sins he had committed over the course of the preceding year. *All* his sins. The understanding was that his sins were being *transmitted* onto the bull. The bull carried his sins. Then he would sacrifice the bull on the altar, and he would collect some of the bull’s blood in a bowl. Next, he would take two goats, that had been brought to him by the common people, and he would cast lots (roll dice), and he would tie a red band around the horns of one of the goats. Then the High Priest would take some hot embers from the altar, and some incense, and he would burn the incense in the Holy of Holies, filling it with smoke. Then he would take the blood from the bowl, and sprinkle it in the Holy of Holies using his finger, eight times. The understanding was that the blood *purified* the room, *cleansed* it from anything that might be defiling it. Then the High Priest would go to the other goat, the one that didn’t have the red band, and

lay his hands on its head, and confess all the sins of all the priests who served in the temple – every single sin, of every single priest. Those sins were transmitted onto the goat. He would take that goat to the altar, and sacrifice it, collecting its blood in a second bowl. He would take that blood and sprinkle it in the Holy of Holies, with his finger, eight times, just as he had done with the blood from the bull. He would sprinkle some more blood in the room leading to the Holy of Holies, and on the altar itself, purifying it all. The idea is, everything is getting a fresh start. The temple is becoming *clean* again, unstained by any sin of any priest. There's just one goat left, the goat with the red band. The High Priest would go to that goat, lay his hands on it, and confess the sins of the entire people of Israel. Anything that anybody had done, or left undone, that was contrary to the will of God, was transmitted onto that goat with the red band. That poor goat had to carry a *lot* of sin! While the High Priest was praying, anybody who was in attendance at the temple would pray quietly, confessing their own sins. Then the High Priest would lead the goat away, out of the temple, into the wilderness, never to return. That goat came to be known as the "escape goat," because it *escaped* from being sacrificed; later the term got shortened to "scapegoat," the goat that bears everybody's sins. This ritual took place year after year, until the temple was destroyed, 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Then the Jews had to figure out how carry out the ritual aspects of the day, without a Temple, without an altar.

By the time of Jesus, the Day of Atonement had been observed for nearly a thousand years. It was the most important day in the Jewish calendar. It was the day on which *everybody* got a fresh start.

Then Jesus came to Jerusalem ... and they killed him. It was a gruesome, bloody, awful day.

But something remarkable happened in the days and weeks after the crucifixion. The followers of Jesus went back and re-read the ancient scriptures with new eyes. They discovered that there were lots of passages that spoke about Jesus in cryptic, round-about ways. One of the most significant was in Isaiah 52 and 53. There had been attempts to understand this passage before, but never until Jesus died did it *really* make sense. "He was despised and rejected... We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.... Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down.... He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be made whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All we, like sheep, have gone astray, everyone to his own way; yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.... He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.... He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone.... But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him ... he will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins." What the early Christians realized, with the help of the scriptures and maybe with help from Jesus himself, was that what had happened on the cross was a Day of Atonement. Not just *a* Day of Atonement; *the* Day of Atonement. Not just once, but for all time; not just for the Jews, but for everybody. What happened on the cross was essentially the same thing that happened every year in the temple, but on a much grander scale. A *cosmic* scale. There's a sacrifice; there's blood that purifies; there are sins that are forgiven. Except in this case, there was neither a bull nor a goat, but a Lamb. "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) He was the sacrifice, *and* the scapegoat, *and* the High Priest, all rolled into one.

The early Christians described it like this:

“God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners... We have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ.” (Romans 5:8-9)

“Christ himself suffered on account of sins, once for all, the righteous one on behalf of the unrighteous.” (1 Peter 3:18)

“He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures...” (1 Corinthians 15:3)

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (John 3:16)

“He is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf. He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin.... Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people’s sins.” (Hebrews 7:25-27)

“The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time.... It is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.... He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect. Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time.... For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:1-14)

That’s what he did for us. He forever made perfect us who are being made holy. There are some fancy terms here. Atonement, the state of being at one with God. Redemption, the transaction that delivers us from all our sin. Salvation, the free gift of healing and liberation from the weight of our sins and their consequences. Justification, the instantaneous process of being declared righteous in the sight of God. Sanctification, the ongoing process of growing in personal holiness through the Holy Spirit. A bunch of inter-related things all happen here, at the cross. Jesus gave himself as a sacrificial offering on our behalf. He took on all our sin. All our sin. Everything that you have ever confessed, everything that you ever will confess, everything that you don’t even know you need to confess – Jesus covered it all. Every single last bit of it. Like the scapegoat that took on the sins of all the people, Jesus took on your sin, and yours, and yours, and mine. And your neighbor’s ... and your friend’s ... and your enemy’s ... and even the people you despise most in the world. One sacrifice. One offering. For all sin. For all time. It’s all ... wiped away. You get a clean slate. You are redeemed, saved, justified, forgiven. You no longer have to carry that sin around any more. Jesus took it all. You are at one, with God.

That’s what happened on Good Friday. One day ... that changes everything.

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