



By

Mark McGee

What Did the Cross Achieve?, By J. I. Packer, Foreword by Mark Dever (Crossway, 2023) is part of *Crossway Short Classics*. They are small in size and low in price, but BIG in theological impact.

The Cross

The Cross of Jesus Christ is at the ‘center’ of all human history. Everything that happened before led to it – and everything that has happened since led from it. That’s an historical statement, but what does it mean spiritually?

That leads us to the purpose of Packer’s book –

The task that I have set myself in this lecture is to focus on and explicate a belief that, by and large, is a distinguishing mark of the worldwide evangelical fraternity: namely, the belief that the cross had the character of penal substitution, and that it was in virtue of this fact that it brought salvation to mankind. Two considerations prompt my attempt. First, the significance of penal substitution is not always stated as exactly as is desirable, so that the idea often gets misunderstood and caricatured by its critics; and I should like, if I can, to make such misunderstanding more difficult. Second, I am one those who believe that this notion takes us to the

very heart of the Christian gospel, and I welcome the opportunity of commending my conviction by analysis and argument. pp 3-4

Having come out of atheism I count myself blessed to have learned about 'penal substitution' early in my Christian life. Knowing what Jesus Christ accomplished for me and others through His death on the Cross has truly been a great blessing.

How fortunate we are that God 'loved the world' so much that He sent His Son from Heaven to earth to substitute Himself – in our place.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16

We love Him because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

... the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

So the true position, on the type of view we are exploring, may be put thus: We identify with Christ against the practice of sin because we have already identified him as the one who took our place under sentence for sin. We enter upon the life of repentance because we have learned that he first endured for us the death of reparation. The Christ in whom we now accept incorporation is the Christ who previously on the cross became our propitiation – not, therefore, one in whom we achieve our reconciliation with God, but one through whom we receive it as a free gift based on a finished work (Rom. 5:10); and we love him, because he first loved us and gave himself for us. So, substitution, on this view, really is the basic category; the thoughts of Christ as our representative, however construed in detail, cannot be made to mean what substitution means, and our

solidarity with Christ in “confession and praise,” so far from being a concept alternative to that of substitution, is actually a response that presupposes it. pp 55-56

Concerning the idea of ‘penal’ substitution –

Thus us forged a conceptual instrument for conveying the thoughts that God remits our sins and accepts our persons into favor not because of any amends we have attempted, but because the penalty that was our due was diverted into Christ. The notion that the phrase “penal substitution” expresses is that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption, and glory. To affirm penal substitution is to say believers are in debt to Christ specifically for this, and that this is the mainspring of all their joy, peace, and praise both now and for eternity. pp 56-57

I highly recommend *What Did the Cross Achieve?* Whether you agree with penal substitution or not. I think you will find Professor Packer's presentation thoroughly biblical and quite convincing.

I also recommend the many articles that Crossway has made available from Professor Packer. You can [find them here](#).

Publisher's Description

A Classic Essay on Penal Substitutionary Atonement from Theologian J. I. Packer

Penal substitutionary atonement—the belief that Jesus's death on the cross satisfied God's wrath against sin—is central to the Christian faith, but frequently debated. *Is it just to punish an innocent person in place of the guilty? How can the temporary death of one substitute for the eternal death of many? Why doesn't the cross grant Christians unlimited permission to sin?*

In this famous essay, late theologian J. I. Packer analyzes Scripture and the works of early Reformers to defend the truth of Christ's substitutionary suffering and death, the heart of the Christian gospel. Considered one of the most significant short works on penal substitutionary atonement from the 20th century, this careful, concise essay has influenced prominent theologians and is essential reading for students, pastors, and laypeople.

- **From Renowned Theologian J. I. Packer:** This work was originally delivered as a Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture
- **Part of the Crossway Short Classics Series:** Other titles include *The Lord's Work in the Lord's Way and No Little People*; *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*; and *Fighting for Holiness*
- **Includes a Foreword by Mark Dever**

Read Chapter 1

About the Author

J. I. Packer (1926–2020) served as the Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College. He authored numerous books, including the classic bestseller *Knowing God*. Packer also served as general editor for the English Standard Version Bible and as theological editor for the *ESV Study Bible*.

From the Crossway Website

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