CROSSWAY SHORT CLASSICS

What Did the Cross Achieve?

J. I. PACKER

Foreword by
Mark Dever

What Did the Cross Achieve?

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WHAT DID THE CROSS ACHIEVE?

J. I. PACKER

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Foreword

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE of knowing James Packer, or "Jim" (as he told me and many others to call him), personally. I got to know him in 1984 when he was at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary teaching a class. After class, I saw him alone in the dining room, introduced myself, and asked him if he would like a home-cooked meal. He responded enthusiastically that he would. I called my wife and brought home J. I. Packer for dinner!

Jim Packer would introduce himself in his classes saying "Packer's my name and packing's my game." By this he meant that he would stuff content into his lectures and reading assignments

until the students were full with the material. He was a gifted Bible teacher and a master popularizer of Reformed theology.

For many of us Christians who came of age in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, J. I. Packer was our first, and often our best, teacher of theology. He was our guide to historic Christianity. His treatments of the atonement, the authority of the Bible, and other topics were both popularly written and theologically careful. To settle certain issues for myself, I turned again and again to his books, which I would then give out to help others. *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, and his introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* were the first serious theology texts read by many people in my generation. And of course, all of Packer's skill shined forth in his bestseller, *Knowing God*.

All the while, Jim Packer was warm, kind, and pleasant. His mind was always alive, especially with thinking through the meaning of ideas. He often helped students or friends see the implications of what they said, perhaps even unintentional implications. And he did it often with a prodding, Socratic style of questioning.

"What Did the Cross Achieve?" was originally given as the annual Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture in 1973 at Tyndale House, Cambridge. In this address, Packer dives deep into the Bible's teaching on the death of Christ and its atoning significance. Crucially, Packer is also concerned with how Christians and theologians down the centuries dealt with the question, "Is penal substitution one image of the atonement, or the heart of it?" He concludes—rightly, in my view—that it's the heart.

Packer's lecture was a watershed clarification of a doctrine that he himself had been sometimes criticized for downplaying. In "What Did the Cross Achieve?," Packer engaged directly with criticisms of penal substitution that were effectively minimizing or undermining it. Whereas some scholars saw penal substitution as just one of many images of the atonement used by the New Testament writers (to be considered equally or even as less than the others, such as ransom and victory), Packer demonstrated that all other metaphors used to describe the reality of Christ's atoning death *assume* penal substitution. Packer's great conclusion is that penal substitution is not merely one of a series of images; it is rather at the heart of the atonement itself.

I'm delighted that Crossway has decided to reprint this as a book of its own. It is worth your

time to read (or reread). This work, while short, is nonetheless "packed" with truth about the astonishing saving work of Jesus.

Read and marvel!

Mark Dever
Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, DC

Series Preface

JOHN PIPER ONCE WROTE that books do not change people, but paragraphs do. This pithy statement gets close to the idea at the heart of the Crossway Short Classics series: some of the greatest and most powerful Christian messages are also some of the shortest and most accessible. The broad stream of confessional Christianity contains an astonishing wealth of timeless sermons, essays, lectures, and other short pieces of writing. These pieces have challenged, inspired, and borne fruit in the lives of millions of believers across church history and around the globe.

The Crossway Short Classics series seeks to serve two purposes. First, it aims to beautifully preserve these short historic pieces of writing through new high-quality physical editions. Second, it aims to transmit them to a new generation of readers, especially readers who may not be inclined or able to access a larger volume. Short-form content is especially valuable today, as the challenge of focusing in a distracting, constantly moving world becomes more intense. The volumes in the Short Classics series present incisive, gospel-centered grace and truth through a concise, memorable medium. By connecting readers with these accessible works, the Short Classics series hopes to introduce Christians to those great heroes of the faith who wrote them, providing readers with representative works that both nourish the soul and inspire further study.

Readers should note that the spelling and punctuation of these works have been lightly updated where applicable. Scripture references and other citations have also been added where appropriate. Language that reflects a work's origin as a sermon or public address has been retained. Our goal is to preserve as much as possible the authentic text of these classic works.

Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use these short works to arrest your attention, preach the gospel to your soul, and motivate you to continue exploring the treasure chest of church history, to the praise and glory of God in Christ.

Biography of J. I. Packer

JAMES INNELL PACKER (1926–2020) was born in England. As a boy, he suffered a severe head injury that prevented him from participating in sports. Taking refuge in books, Packer discovered his intellectual gifts, and while a student at Oxford University, he was converted to Christianity. Shortly afterward, he discovered the writings of the Puritans, whose emphases on the trustworthiness of Scripture, genuinely transformed affections, and earnest pursuit of holiness deeply shaped Packer's life and theology.

While working in Christian education, Packer wrote a series of articles about the basics of the

faith for a small evangelical magazine. These articles were expanded and adapted into *Knowing God*, which became one of the bestselling Reformed Christian books of the century and established Packer as an influential theologian and teacher. Packer's teaching and writing ministry grew in influence, and he became one of evangelicalism's foremost defenders of biblical inerrancy and the doctrines of grace. His prolific career included numerous publications, a tenure at *Christianity Today* as a senior editor, the role of general editor for the English Standard Version of the Bible, and a faculty position at Regent College.

Packer's keen insight and articulation helped to make him one of the best and most effective popularizers of Reformed theology in the twentieth century. "What Did the Cross Achieve?" was delivered as a lecture for Tyndale House in 1973 and demonstrates Packer's theological skill

as well as his ability to connect doctrine to the Christian life. His efforts shaped an entire generation of Reformed pastors and theologians who carry on the work of this modern-day Puritan.

WHAT DID THE CROSS ACHIEVE?

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 of 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.[1]

My plan is this: first, to clear up some questions of method, so that there will be no doubt as to what I am doing; second, to explore what it means to call Christ's death substitutionary; third, to see what further meaning is added when Christ's substitutionary suffering is called penal; fourth, to note in closing that the analysis offered is not out of harmony with learned exegetical opinion. These are, I believe, needful preliminaries to any serious theological estimate of this view.

MYSTERY AND MODEL

Every theological question has behind it a history of study, and narrow eccentricity in handling it is

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1 Publisher's note: Packer's original footnotes have been reduced for ease of readability.

unavoidable unless the history is taken into account. Adverse comment on the concept of penal substitution often betrays narrow eccentricity of this kind. The two main historical points relating to this idea are, first, that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Melanchthon, and their reforming contemporaries were the pioneers in stating it and, second, that the arguments brought against it in 1578 by the Unitarian Pelagian Faustus Socinus in his brilliant polemic *De Jesu Christo Servatore* (*Of Jesus Christ the Savior*) have been central in discussion of it ever since. What the Reformers did was redefine *satisfactio* (satisfaction), the main medieval category for thought about the cross. Anselm's *Cur Deus homo?*, which largely determined the medieval development, saw Christ's *satisfactio* for our sins as the offering of compensation or damages for dishonor done, but the Reformers saw it as the undergoing of vicarious punishment (*poena*)

to meet the claims on us of God's holy law and wrath (i.e., his punitive justice). What Socinus did was to arraign this idea as irrational, incoherent, immoral, and impossible. Giving pardon, he argued, does not square with taking satisfaction, nor does the transferring of punishment from the guilty to the innocent square with justice; nor is the temporary death of one a true substitute for the eternal death of many; and a perfect substitutionary satisfaction, could such a thing be, would necessarily confer on us unlimited permission to continue in sin. Socinus's alternative account of New Testament soteriology, based on the axiom that God forgives without requiring any satisfaction save the repentance that makes us forgivable, was evasive and unconvincing, and had little influence. But his classic critique proved momentous: it held the attention of all exponents of the Reformation view for more than a century

and created a tradition of rationalistic prejudice against that view, which has effectively shaped debate about it right down to our own day.

The almost mesmeric effect of Socinus's critique on Reformed scholastics in particular was on the whole unhappy. It forced them to develop rational strength in stating and connecting up the various parts of their position, which was good, but it also led them to fight back on the challenger's own ground, using the Socinian technique of arguing a priori about God as if he were a man—to be precise, a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century monarch, head of both the legislature and the judiciary in his own realm but bound nonetheless to respect existing law and judicial practice at every point. So the God of Calvary came to be presented in a whole series of expositions right down to that of Louis Berkhof (1938) as successfully avoiding all the moral

and legal lapses that Socinus claimed to find in the Reformation view. But these demonstrations, however skillfully done (and demonstrators like Francis Turretin and Hodge, to name but two,[2] were very skillful indeed), had built-in weaknesses. Their stance was defensive rather than declaratory, analytical and apologetic rather than doxological and kerygmatic. They made the word of the cross sound more like a conundrum than a confession of faith—more like a puzzle, we might say, than a gospel. What was happening? Just this: that in trying to beat Socinian rationalism at its own game, Reformed theologians were conceding the Socinian assumption that every aspect of God's work of reconciliation will be exhaus-

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2   Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elenchticae Geneva* (1682), 2:xiv; A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (London: Nelson, 1868). Turretin's position is usefully summarized in L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 241–52.

tively explicable in terms of a natural theology of divine government drawn from the world of contemporary legal and political thought. Thus, in their zeal to show themselves rational, they became rationalistic. Here as elsewhere, method-ological rationalism became in the seventeenth century a worm in the Reformed bud, leading in the next two centuries to a large-scale withering of its theological flower.

Now I do not query the substantial rightness of the Reformed view of the atonement; on the contrary, I hope to confirm it, as will appear; but I think it is vital that we should unambiguously renounce any such intellectual method as that which I have described, and look for a better one. I shall now try to commend what seems to me a sounder method by offering answers to two questions: (1) What sort of knowledge of Christ's achievement on the cross is open to

us? (2) From what source and by what means do we gain it?

(1) What sort of knowledge of God's action in Christ's death may we have? That a man named Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate around AD 30 is common historical knowledge, but Christian beliefs about his divine identity and the significance of his dying cannot be deduced from that fact alone. What further sort of knowledge about the cross, then, may Christians enjoy?

The answer, we may say, is faith knowledge: by faith we know that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Yes, indeed; but what sort of knowledge is faith knowledge? It is a kind of knowledge of which God is both giver and content. It is a Spirit-given acquaintance with divine realities, given through acquaintance with God's word. It is a kind of knowledge that makes the knower say in one and the same breath, "Whereas

I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25 KJV) and "Now we see in a mirror, dimly . . . now I know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12 NKJV). For it is a unique kind of knowledge that, though real, is not full; it is knowledge of what is discernible within a circle of light against the background of a larger darkness; it is, in short, knowledge of a mystery, the mystery of the living God at work.

"Mystery" is used here as it was by Charles Wesley when he wrote:

> 'Tis mystery all! The immortal dies!
> Who can explore his strange design?
> In vain the firstborn seraph tries
> To sound the depths of love divine![3]

"Mystery" in this sense (traditional in theology) means a reality distinct from us that in our

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[3] Publisher's note: Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain?" (1738).

very apprehending of it remains unfathomable to us: a reality that we acknowledge as actual without knowing how it is possible, and that we therefore describe as incomprehensible. Christian metaphysicians, moved by wonder at the world, speak of the created order as "imagery," meaning that there is more to it, and more of God in it, than they can grasp; and similarly Christian theologians, taught by revelation, apply the same word to the self-revealed and self-revealing God, and to his work of reconciliation and redemption through Christ. It will be seen that this definition of mystery corresponds less to Paul's use of the word *mustērion* (which he applied to the open secret of God's saving purpose, set forth in the gospel) than to his prayer that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:19 NKJV). Knowing through divine enlightenment that which passes knowledge is

precisely what it means to be acquainted with the mystery of God. The revealed "mystery" (in Paul's sense) of Christ confronts us with the unfathomable "mystery" (in the sense I defined) of the Creator who exceeds the comprehension of his creatures. Accordingly, Paul ends his full-dress, richest-ever exposition of the mystery of Christ by crying: "O depth of wealth, wisdom, and knowledge in God! How unsearchable his judgements, how untraceable his ways! Who knows the mind of the Lord? . . . Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is—to him be glory for ever! Amen" (Rom. 11:33ff. NEB). Here Paul shows, and shares, his awareness that the God of Jesus remains the God of Job, and that the highest wisdom of the theological theorist, even when working under divine inspiration as Paul did, is to recognize that he is, as it were, gazing into the sun, whose very brightness makes it impossible for him fully to see it; so that at the

end of the day he has to admit that God is much more to him than theories can ever contain, and to humble himself in adoration before the one whom he can never fully analyze.

Now the atonement is a mystery in the defined sense, one aspect of the total mystery of God. But it does not stand alone in this. Every aspect of God's reality and work, without exception, is mystery. The eternal Trinity; God's sovereignty in creation, providence, and grace; the incarnation, exaltation, present reign, and approaching return of Jesus Christ; the inspiring of the Holy Scriptures; and the ministry of the Spirit in the Christian and the church—each of these (to look no further) is a reality beyond our full fathoming, just as the cross is. And theories about any of these things that used human analogies to dispel the dimension of mystery

would deserve our distrust, just as rationalistic theories about the cross do.

It must be stressed that the mystery is in each case the reality itself, as distinct from anything in our apprehension of it, and as distinct therefore from our theories, problems, affirmations, and denials about it. What makes it a mystery is that creatures like ourselves can comprehend it only in part. To say this does not open the door to skepticism, for our knowledge of divine realities (like our knowledge of each other) is genuine knowledge expressed in notions that, so far as they go, are true. But it does close the door against rationalism, in the sense of theorizing that claims to explain with finality any aspect of God's way of existing and working. And with that, it alerts us to the fact that the presence in our theology of unsolved problems is not necessarily a reflection on the truth or adequacy of our thoughts.

Inadequate and untrue theories do of course exist: a theory (the word comes from the Greek term *theōrein*, meaning, "to look at") is a view or sight of something, and if one's way of looking at it is perverse one's view will be distorted, and distorted views are always full of problems. But the mere presence of problems is not enough to prove a view distorted; true views in theology also entail unsolved problems, while any view that was problem free would certainly be rationalistic and reductionist. True theories in theology, whether about the atonement or anything else, will suspect themselves of being inadequate to their object throughout. One thing that Christians know by faith is that they know only in part.

None of this, of course, is new or unfamiliar; it all belongs to the main historic stream of Christian thought. But I state it here, perhaps too laboriously, because it has not always been brought

to bear rigorously enough on the doctrine of the atonement. Also, this position has linguistic implications that touch the doctrine of the atonement in ways that are not always fully grasped; and my next task is to show what these are.

Human knowledge and thoughts are expressed in words, and what we must note now is that all attempts to speak of the mystery of the unique and transcendent God involve the stretching of ordinary language. We say, for instance, that God is both plural and singular, being three in one; that he directs and determines the free acts of men; that he is wise, good, and sovereign when he allows Christians to starve or die of cancer; that the divine Son has always upheld the universe, even when he was a human baby; and so forth. At first sight, such statements might appear nonsensical (either meaningless or false). But Christians say that,

though they would be nonsensical if made of men, they are true as statements about God. If so, however, it is clear that the key words are not being used in an everyday way. Whatever our views on the origins of human language and the inspiration of the Scriptures (both matters on which it seems that options are currently being broadened rather than reduced), there can be no dispute that the meaning of all the nouns, adjectives, and verbs that we use for stating facts and giving descriptions is anchored, at least in the first instance, in our experience of knowing things and people (ourselves included) in this world. Ordinary language is thus being adapted for an extraordinary purpose when we use it to speak of God. Christians have always made this adaptation easily in their prayers, praises, and proclamations, as if it were a natural thing to do (as indeed I think it is), and the doubts

articulated by living (if somewhat old-fashioned) philosophers like A. J. Ayer and Antony Flew as to whether such utterance expresses knowledge and conveys information about anything more than private attitudes seem curiously provincial as well as paradoxical.[4] Moreover, it is noticeable that the common Christian verbal forms for expressing divine mysteries have from the first shown remarkable consistency and steadiness in maintaining their built-in logical strangeness, as if the apprehended reality of God was itself sustaining them (as indeed I think it was). Language about the cross illustrates this clearly: liturgies, hymns, and literature—homiletical, catechetical, and apologetic—all show that Christians have

4   A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936); Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology,* ed. A. G. N. Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM, 1955), 96–130.

from the start lived by faith in Christ's death as a sacrifice made to God in reparation for their sins, however uncouth and mythological such talk sounds (and must always have sounded), however varied the presentations of atonement that teachers tried out, and however little actual theologizing about the cross went on in particular periods, especially the early centuries.

Christian language, with its peculiarities, has been much studied during the past twenty years, and two things about it have become clear. First, all its odd, stretched, contradictory, and incoherent-sounding features derive directly from the unique Christian notion of the transcendent and tripersonal Creator God. Christians regard God as free from the limits that bind creatures like ourselves, who bear God's image while not existing on his level, and Christian language, following biblical precedent, shakes free from

ordinary limits in a way that reflects this fact. So, for instance, faced with John's declaration in 1 John 4:8–10, "God is love. . . . Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (KJV), Calvin can write without hesitation: "The word propitiation [Lat. *placatio*; Gk. *hilasmos*] has great weight: for God, in a way that cannot be put into words [Lat. *ineffabili quodam modo*], at the very time when he loved us, was hostile [Lat. *infensus*] to us till he was reconciled in Christ."[5] Calvin's phrase "in a way that cannot be put into words" is his acknowledgment that the mystery of God is beyond our grasp. To Calvin, this duality of attitude, love and hostility, which in human psychological terms is inconceivable, is part of God's moral glory, a sentiment that might make rationalistic

5   John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.17.

theologians shake their heads, but at which John certainly would have nodded his.

Second, Christian speech verbalizes the apprehended mystery of God by using a distinctive nonrepresentational picture language. This consists of parables, analogies, metaphors, and images piled up in balance with each other, as in the Bible itself (from which this language is first learned), and all pointing to the reality of God's presence and action in order to evoke awareness of it and response to it. Analysis of the functioning of this language is currently in full swing, and no doubt much remains to be said. Already, however, the discussion has produced one firm result of major importance—the recognition that the verbal units of Christian speech are "models," comparable to the thought models of modern physics.[6] The

6   The pioneer in stating this was Ian T. Ramsey. See his *Religious Language* (London: SCM, 1957), *Models and Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford

significance of this appears from John MacIntyre's judgment "that the theory of models succeeds in reinstating the doctrine of analogy in modern theological logic . . . and that analogy is to be interpreted in terms of a theory of models and not vice versa."[7] The doctrine of analogy is the time-harbored account, going back to Aquinas, of how ordinary language is used to speak intelligibly of a God who is partly like us (because we bear his image) and partly unlike us (because he is the infinite Creator while we are finite creatures).[8] All theological models, like the nondescriptive models of the physical sciences, have an analogical character; they are, we might say, analogies with a purpose, thought patterns that function in a

University Press, 1964), and *Christian Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

7   John MacIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (London: SCM, 1966), 63.

8   Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.13. See Ian T. Ramsey, *Words about God* (London: SCM, 1971), 36ff.

particular way, teaching us to focus one area of reality (relationships with God) by conceiving of it in terms of another, better-known area of reality (relationships with each other). Thus they actually inform us about our relationship with God and through the Holy Spirit enable us to unify, clarify, and intensify our experience in that relationship.

The last song in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* assures us that "any dream will do" to wake the weary into joy.[9] Will any model do to give knowledge of the living God? Historically, Christians have not thought so. Their characteristic theological method, whether practiced clumsily or skillfully, consistently or inconsistently, has been to take biblical models as their God-given starting point, to base their belief system on what

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9   Publisher's note: Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (London: Novello, 1971).

biblical writers use these models to say, and to let these models operate as controls, both suggesting and delimiting what further, secondary models may be developed in order to explicate these that are primary. As models in physics are hypotheses formed under the suggestive control of empirical evidence to correlate and predict phenomena, so Christian theological models are explanatory constructs formed to help us know, understand, and deal with God, the ultimate reality. From this standpoint, the whole study of Christian theology—biblical, historical, and systematic—is the exploring of a three-tier hierarchy of models: first, the control models given in Scripture (God, Son of God, kingdom of God, word of God, love of God, glory of God, body of Christ, justification, adoption, redemption, new birth, and so forth— in short, all the concepts analyzed in Kittel's great *Wörterbuch* and its many epigoni); next, dogmatic

models that the church crystallized out to define and defend the faith (homoousion, Trinity, nature, hypostatic union, double procession, sacrament, supernatural, and others—in short, all the concepts usually dealt with in doctrinal textbooks); finally, interpretive models lying between Scripture and defined dogma that particular theologians and theological schools developed for stating the faith to contemporaries (penal substitution, verbal inspiration, divinization, Barth's *nihil—das Nichtige*—and many more).

It is helpful to think of theology in these terms, and of the atonement in particular. Socinus went wrong in this matter first by identifying the biblical model of God's kingship with his own sixteenth-century monarchy model (a mistake later repeated by Hugo Grotius), second by treating this not-wholly-biblical model as his control, and third by failing to acknowledge that the mystery

of God is more than any one model, even the best, can express. We have already noticed that some orthodox writers answering Socinus tended to slip in a similar way. The passion to pack God into a conceptual box of our own making is always strong, but must be resisted. If we bear in mind that all the knowledge we can have of the atonement is of a mystery about which we can only think and speak by means of models, and that remains a mystery when all is said and done, it will keep us from rationalistic pitfalls and thus help our progress considerably.

BIBLE AND MODEL

(2) Now we come up to our second question, my answer to which has been hinted at already. By what means is knowledge of the mystery of the cross given us? I reply: through the didactic