What Did Jesus Do on the Cross?

1. Let's say that Miss Kami sent me to the grocery store to pick up a few things for her. If you asked me what I did, I might say that I went to pick up some milk. Or I might say that I went to pick up bananas, or bread, or paper towels. If you then stopped me and demanded that I tell you what I really did…I'd be confused. You might ask "Did you go for milk or did you go for bread?"

2. But the answer is not a singular item. While I might have had a priority in my mind and she might have had a priority in her mind, the fact is that more than one thing can be true at the same time. Yes, I went for milk, but I also did other things.

3. Early Christians had several views when it came to what Jesus did on the cross. Without getting into the weeds and defining each of these, they were the Recapitulation Theory (Jesus was the new Adam who undid all the harm that Adam did), Ransom Theory (Jesus died as a ransom to either God or Satan to satisfy the debt on the souls of the human race which was inherited from Adam's original sin)…

4. The Christus Victor theory emphasizes Jesus's triumph over the evil powers of the world, rescues His people, and establishes a new relationship between God and mankind. This theory dominated the atonement theology for the first 1000yrs of the faith and is still held by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

5. The Satisfaction Theory says that Jesus's death on the cross satisfies the requirements of the law that demanded restitution for the sins of mankind.

6. The Moral Influence Theory says that Jesus died to show the love of the Father, changing our perception of God from that of an angry Father to a loving one.

7. John Calvin – remember him? – was the first to thoroughly codify the Penal Substitution Theory or what many of us call the Vicarious Atonement Theory. It says that Jesus died to satisfy God's wrath

against mankind. God's sense of justice had to be satisfied by His Son paying the price for all our sins.

8. For most Protestants and, I daresay, most Catholics, the Vicarious Atonement Theory is nothing less than the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It seems right and it fits a great many Bible passages. It also aligns with all the sacrifices we saw in the Hebrew Scriptures. We remember and quote such texts as Hebrews 9:22, "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins."

9. Paul even equated this with the Gospel of Christ. 1st Corinthians 15:1-8. So…it's true, right? The Gospel is the story Paul laid out here and it is all about the cross, correct? Yes and no. Let's see what Jesus said the Gospel was.

10. Jesus said "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, for that is why I was sent. (Luke 4:43). He said in Mark 1:15, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news."

11. Matthew 9:35; Matthew 4:23; Matthew 24:14. Jesus constantly talked about the kingdom of God. He said it was upon you (Matthew 12:28), within you (Luke 17:21) and, after he was resurrected and appeared to his disciples, Acts 1:3 says that he spoke about the kingdom for the entire 40 days he was with them.

12. And that kingdom wasn't a place you would go to when you died. It was the present, powerful Kingdom of God that lives in you through the gift of God, the power of the Holy Spirit and, yes, the victory of Christ.

13. Notice, however, that when Jesus spoke about the good news, or the Gospel, he didn't mention the cross or the resurrection. Does that mean that Paul got it wrong in 1st Corinthians 15:1-8? If you've listened to the Midweek Bible Study when we went through First Corinthians, you know I don't think Paul got it wrong at all.

14. More than one thing can be true at the same time and Jesus did more than one thing by his life, teaching, dead, and resurrection.

Rather than fighting over theological territory, it might be a better idea to let God define His own terms and tell us what He did.

15. The cross stands empty now, but it leaves us with lots of questions. If Jesus had to die to pay for our sins…who did he pay? If God is love and Jesus is the exact representation of God, then how do we square that with a view of God being ready (even gleeful) to drop us into the fires of hell like dropping worms in a frying pan?

16. When we get to heaven, will we see a happy Jesus and a seething Father? The Vicarious Atonement Theory says a lot that is good and understandable but it also leaves us with questions that it can't answer (because the theory caused the questions, the issue). And why didn't the early church talk about it that way at all?

17. There is another issue: if this atonement theory is true and God is primarily a judge who demands justice and is far too holy and righteous to allow sinners in His sight, and if that means He must pour out His wrath on us…how does that square with the announcement of the angels upon the birth of Jesus? "Peace on earth, good will toward mankind."

18. Or how does that square with John 3:16? Keith Giles, who has written the Jesus Un series (Unbound, Unexpected, etc.) says that if Calvin had rewritten John 3:16 to fit his theology of the cross and his definition of the gospel, it would read like this: "For God was so filled with wrath against the world, that He sent His only begotten son to suffer the punishment that all deserved. That if anyone would hope to escape eternal torment in the lake of fire, and would raise their hand and repeat this prayer in their hearts, they might escape this justifiable wrath of God against us all. For the son was not sent into the world to forgive us of our sins, but to suffer the righteous anger of the Father and to receive punishment for us so that God can now extend to us His perfect love and forgiveness."

19. That sounds…not quite right. It is true that the Old Covenant law required the shedding of blood. That is what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 9:22. The law was very plain and insistent when it came to sacrifices. And yet…

20. When we come to the Psalms or Hosea or many other places, God seems to not want the sacrifices at all. Listen to this very startling passage: Jeremiah 7:22-23. Most of you know a more familiar passage, Micah 6:6-8.

21. Or how about Isaiah 1:11-14. Was God just angry at that moment or did He mean what He said? Check out these amazing passages: Psalm 50:7-15. Psalm 51:16-17.

22. So…did God order the sacrifices of animals in the first place? I think the evidence is that, yes, He most certainly did. Then why the changes we see already in the Hebrew scriptures, turning from them and into calls for obedience and an inner, moral character that manifests in being loving and doing good? Perhaps, the nearer we came to Jesus, the less we needed sacrifices. Perhaps. We might never know for certain, but it is interesting to notice the pattern.

23. More on this next week. For now, let's read Philippians 2:5-8. More than one thing can be true at the same time. Did Jesus die so that our sins would be forgiven? Yes…but he also did more, much more.