

Why Crucify, Why not Stone?

By David H. Linden

They stoned Stephen. We read in John that they twice attempted to stone Jesus. After Judas led them to the secluded place where they arrested Jesus, they had a company of soldiers; they could have stoned Him then. They had laid the charge of blasphemy repeatedly; they had an explicit commandment for the mode of execution, and they had opportunity. Why would Jesus' enemies seek crucifixion? The attempted stonings were rash, not deliberated. The decision to crucify was a more careful decision by the leadership. The demand was not to kill Him or stone Him; they were quite specific in what they wanted. It was "crucify Him, crucify Him."

Yet crucifixion was not the way in ancient Israel to remove a false prophet. (That was the view His enemies had of Him!) The Sanhedrin said He was guilty of blasphemy, and they said to Pilate, "We have a law and by that law He ought to die!" If Jesus were guilty of blasphemy for calling Himself the Son of God, then the commanded penalty for this crime was stoning. If the Jews were serious about removing blasphemy and so meticulous about keeping the law, why not execute Him that way? Why a crucifixion when the law of God ordered a different kind of execution?

The Bible does not report all the reasoning of Jesus' enemies. We do know of Caiaphas' view that they must kill Him or risk a Roman intervention. They saw so many being convinced by His miracles, they feared losing their following. A certain desperation was building. Judas' offer of help meant Jesus fell into their hands sooner than expected. Since they had Him, they had to follow through without delay, though they did not want His murder during the Passover. (Such a wonderful opportunity as killing the Prince of Life does not happen every day.) Murder was agreed to -- now how to do it.

The Command to Stone

Deuteronomy 13 commands the stoning of deceivers who lead people astray from the Lord. But there is a later word in Deuteronomy 21 that must have sent a tingle of diabolical delight up their spines. Rebellious sons must be stoned, which would leave a corpse under a pile of rock. Yet despicable as it was, the law of God • anticipated that some might make a dead body dangle from a tree for all to gawk at. God reminded them that the executed criminal was under His curse, and for that reason the dead offender was to be put out of sight. He could not be left overnight; that body must come down, signifying that evil had been purged from the land. Having a corpse out in the open does not fit purging the evil from their midst. The key phrase to remember is *"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse,"* Deuteronomy 21:23.

Would Jesus' enemies prefer that He be under a pile of stones or hung on a tree? They certainly had sufficient hatred to prefer greater humiliation. They had seen Roman crucifixions. They knew what Deuteronomy said about bodies remaining up on display overnight, and possibly for days till the birds had picked off all the flesh. They had undoubtedly pleaded with the Romans numerous times to take bodies down because leaving them up would desecrate their land! Rome, for its purpose, wanted rebels intimidated and would prefer to leave them up. The Jewish leadership wanted to preserve their law and the sacredness of their land. The significance of crucifixion was not new to them.

The Decision Not to Stone

One day someone came up with the idea that if they could just have Jesus up there hanging on a cross then that text in Deuteronomy would obviously apply to Him. They would

have the law of God saying about Jesus, "*anyone hung on a tree was cursed by God.*" I can hear him now, telling his peers that they had in a crucifixion the ultimate argument to repudiate Jesus. After all, how could anyone ever believe in a Messiah who had been cursed by God? What a delicious proof for them that He was an imposter, a deceiver, one who did His impressive miracles in the power of the devil! Surely no one would believe in Him anymore, and they would be finished with this Jesus nuisance forever.

Some said it sounded as good as showing on the fourth day the dead body of the man who said He would rise on the third! Things were looking up for the opponents of Jesus; plus one of His disciples had come to their aid.

Only the Romans Could Do It

There remained one sticky problem. Jews were not allowed to execute their criminals, even if their law called for it. They were allowed much freedom to practice their religion, but Rome retained the execution of criminals as its sole prerogative.

Crucifixion was a patented Roman mode of execution. If Jews did that on their own, they would usurp Roman right - the sort of thing that might lead to their crucifixion! They had better get the Romans to do the job for them.

It took some convincing. The witnesses against Jesus were not well coached or terribly convincing. Pilate saw through their intrigue in a moment. They were seeking to use the authority of Rome as their tool. When they applied sufficient pressure, he gave in, and Jesus was crucified, not stoned.

The Gospel in the Curse

From the angle of the apostate leadership of Israel, a crucifixion paid a tremendous theological benefit. Jesus would be acknowledged as one cursed by God. They evidently missed that this was indeed what Isaiah had said, ... *we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.*" So while they pursued their agenda, they were unwittingly serving God's. God had theological reasons, too. The will of God was that Christ should die for His people, but it was more. In His death Jesus would be cursed for them so that they could have the blessing Jesus deserved. On Friday He took what we deserved, and on Sunday He received what He deserved.

When Adam sinned he, his work, and even the ground he tilled, came under God's curse. God so loved the world, He sent a replacement Adam, Jesus Christ, the new head of a new human family. He would come under that curse and die as a substitute. If one kind of death shows the curse of God more than another, then that would be the one most fitting.

The Significance of Bloodshed

That Jesus died as a substitute was taught and illustrated in millions of offerings of animals. These sacrifices anticipated the Innocent One dying for sinners. Jesus' death was the fulfillment.

The ritual that God instituted cannot be fulfilled by every kind of death. A certain kind of death fits, and others do not. The law required bloodshed in the mode of death for the innocent animals. Jesus, too, would have a death of bloodshed. In stoning, one might bleed, but death from the blunt blows of stones does not fit the bloodshed of centuries of Jewish offerings. In those offerings the victim came under the knife. Israel's priests did not beat the animals to death; they bled them to death, collected the blood, and poured it on the ground. A death by stoning would not fit the ritual that preceded it and was fulfilled by the cross. On the other hand, a crucifixion has no lack of bloodshed to make a clear link to the sacrifices God had commanded centuries before. Such sacrifices anticipated Jesus' bloodshed on the cross. To the ceremonial law, one must add the prediction in Psalm 22: 16 of pierced hands and feet. Stoning would not fulfill such a specific prophecy.

The Humiliation Factor

Sin brings humiliation. If Adam had obeyed, all mankind would have enjoyed the dignity of glory and honor. Entering our humanity, Jesus took not only guilt and death, but the full measure of what our sin brought us. He would have sin's indignity too, the opposite of glory. So He did not die from a painless lethal injection. He would be humiliated in the shameful death of the Roman cross.

They cast lots for His clothes. The Son of God died in a way no film or portrait has ever dared to show naked, with His hands nailed elsewhere so He could not cover His private parts. Thus did Jesus die by crucifixion, with a kind of humiliation we would not have given to Hitler, had we the opportunity to bring him to justice.

The Father was pleased for our salvation to crush the Son (Isaiah 53:10). It was a dramatic infliction of sin's penalty, including personal humiliation. We must not miss that Christ's obedience in going to the cross was a provision of the loving grace of the Father that results in Jesus' glorification and worship by the entire universe. His offering for sin was not a death of half measures. There was no cheating, no holding back, no pretending this will do, or that's enough, or let's not go overboard! Jesus drank our entire cup. The shame was part of His suffering for our sin. He knew the shame, but that did not stop Him from going to the cross. His death was not like one dying in bed with the family gathered around.

Roman Complicity

The crucifixion of our Lord had another feature to it. If it had been by stoning, the world could consider it an entirely Jewish event. Crucifixion was a Roman message on Roman letterhead. Jesus was tried in a Roman court and crucified by Roman soldiers. *"Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus"* (Acts 4:27).

Crucifixion gave Jesus' death genuine Roman involvement, while by means of it the Jews rejected their king. This adds up to a mutual decision. Rome had the innocent Man killed - so much for its vaunted justice! Its worldly glory was corrupt.

A Roman death demonstrates that contempt for the Messiah was a rejection by the world. It was not just "the Jews" but others, *the rulers of this age ... [who] did not understand, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory* (1 Corinthians 2:8). Scripture teaches a universal rejection of Christ and universal ignorance of Him unless one is born of the Spirit.

It helps us not to love the world when we see its true colors. A Roman death, at the instigation of the Jews, united the world and apostate covenant breakers, whether they liked it or not. They united against Christ, as Psalm 2 shows. Could any other mode of murder have done it so well? Mere complicity by the Romans in a Jewish stoning would not carry the same significance. To show a world against God, the Roman hand was also needed in His death.

Enhancing the Gospel

Bloodshed conveyed substitution, and crucifixion, the divine curse. From the Sanhedrin's perspective the crucifixion was meant to ensure that all would reject Jesus as the promised One to come. Their efforts fulfilled the plan of God perfectly. They enhanced the gospel by the mode of death they yearned for. A cursed death fit in with the truth that our sins were imputed to Him. Later they had the tomb guarded and sealed, thinking that would prevent His body from being stolen. What they prevented was the credibility of their later argument that it had been stolen. Briefly, it appeared that all was going their way - actually, it was going God's way.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Galatians 3:13-14)

After the resurrection, the apostles went on to proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection. They contrasted what men did to Him and what God did. They did not shy away from saying He had been crucified. They showed the humiliation and glorification in sharp contrast. Rather than being suppressed, the very word *crucified* was often in their preaching. For Paul, the gospel was not just that Jesus died; it was *Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. " Peter referred to the cross as a *tree*, a choice designed to connect with the text in Deuteronomy 21.

How the Apostle Read Deuteronomy

Paul took Deuteronomy 21 and quoted the very part that must have been in the minds of the Sanhedrin, "*Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.*" Watch the order Paul gives:

1. Everyone who does not obey the law is cursed.
2. No one has obeyed the law, so all are cursed. (This is stated in Romans 3).
3. Christ redeemed us from that curse.
4. He did it by being cursed for us.
5. This curse is evident in the mode of Jesus' death.
6. He redeemed by being cursed so blessing would replace it.

What the Death of Christ Means

The death of Jesus was a unique sacrifice that cannot be repeated. It was effective to accomplish all that God intended, and it happened in detail in the way God had decided death by crucifixion. By His sacrifice, Christ satisfied God and absorbed His wrath against us for our sin. He took the curse from us and replaced it with the blessing promised to the covenant people. He defeated the devil and set His people free. He removed the guilt of our sin from our record and brought us forgiveness and reconciled God to us.

Bearing our Cross

We are called upon to take up our cross and follow Him. Such carrying is not penance and never atones. Serving Christ will always entail suffering, a privilege we ought never to avoid. It is a way to side with Christ in a world that opposes Him. We cannot be friends with the world. It crucified Christ, and it will reject us too as we are loyal to Him. He was cursed for us so we cannot be cursed by the Lord Who has forgiven us, but we will be cursed by the world. We must never seek its blessing on us.

The world united against Christ, yet all nations are promised to Christ. Their redemption can only come by the crucifixion the world imposed on the One they rejected. God has turned human treachery to our salvation. Jesus said of the cross, "*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself*" He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:32,33).

The cross still repels the world, and its message is still foolishness to it, but for us who are being saved, it is the power of God to salvation. Jesus took our shame; let us never be ashamed of Him, but boast only in Him and all He has accomplished for us. We must be grateful for the grace that planned it all.

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