

# Why Crucify, Why not Stone?

Galatians 3:6-14; Matthew 27:11-44; Deuteronomy 21:18-23; John 19:1-20

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Our Lord was crucified. 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,<sup>1</sup> and they said to Pilate, "We have a law and by that law He ought to die!"<sup>2</sup> If Jesus were guilty of blasphemy for calling Himself the Son of God,<sup>3</sup> then the commanded penalty for this crime was stoning. If the Jews were serious about removing blasphemy and so meticulous about keeping the law,<sup>4</sup> why not execute Him that way? Why a crucifixion when the law of God ordered a different kind of execution?

Then the LORD said to Moses: "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, **and the entire assembly is to stone him.** Say to the Israelites: 'If anyone curses his God, he will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death. (Leviticus 24:13-16)

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God." (John 10:33)

They stoned Stephen.<sup>5</sup> We read in John that they twice attempted to stone Jesus.<sup>6</sup> After Judas led them to the secluded place where they arrested Jesus, they had a company of soldiers;<sup>7</sup> supposedly 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 incited was not "kill Him; kill Him"; they were quite specific in what they wanted. It was "crucify Him, crucify Him".<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> (Such a wonderful opportunity as killing the Prince of Life<sup>11</sup> does not happen every day.) Murder was agreed to, now how to do it.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:63

<sup>2</sup> John 19:7 "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

<sup>3</sup> John 10:36

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 23:23,24

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:57-60

<sup>6</sup> John 8:58,59; 10:31-39

<sup>7</sup> John 18:2,3

<sup>8</sup> Mark 15:13-15; John 19:6

<sup>9</sup> John 11:45-53

<sup>10</sup> Of course the timing of Jesus' death was according to God's plan not theirs. They preferred later, not on the feast day. But God would have the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7) offered on Passover Day.

*Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot." (Mark 14:1,2)*

<sup>11</sup> Acts 3:15

## **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. That 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*. (Note 2 Kings 17:18-23.) He could not be left overnight; that body must come down, signifying their obedience to God that evil had been purged from the land. Having a corpse out in the open does not fit purging the evil from their midst, v.21. 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 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, so would prefer to leave them up. The Jewish leadership wanted to preserve their law and the sacredness of their land.<sup>12</sup> 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 that guy 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,<sup>13</sup> one who did His impressive miracles in the power of the devil!<sup>14</sup> Surely no one would believe in Him anymore, and they would be finished with this Jesus nuisance forever.<sup>15</sup> 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. The 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.

Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” “But we have no right to execute anyone,” the Jews objected. This happened so that the words Jesus had spoken indicating the kind of death he was going to die would be fulfilled (John 18:31,32).

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<sup>12</sup> John 19:31

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 27:63

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 12:24

<sup>15</sup> In the minds of His enemies, it was settled early that He was not the Messiah. They thought He broke the Sabbath and they were certain He was a blasphemer for saying God was His Father, John 5:18. What they needed very much was something highly convincing for the people. As late as the week of the crucifixion, the chief priests and Pharisees “feared the crowds because they [the crowds] held Him [Jesus] to be a prophet” (Matthew 21:46).

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.<sup>16</sup>

It took some convincing. The witnesses against Jesus were not well coached or terribly convincing.<sup>17</sup> Pilate saw through their intrigue in a moment.<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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. (Never forget the great exchange: On Friday He took what we deserved and on Sunday He received what He deserved.)

When Adam sinned, his work and even the ground he tilled came under God’s curse.<sup>20</sup> God so loved the world He sent a replacement Adam, Jesus Christ, the new head of a new human family.<sup>21</sup> He would come under that curse and die as a substitute.<sup>22</sup> If one kind of death shows the curse of God more than another, then that would be the one most fitting. Jesus said in advance that His death would be by crucifixion (Matthew 20:19).

## **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 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.

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<sup>16</sup> When Pilate said that they should crucify Him, they knew Pilate, now irritated with them, was taunting them about something they had no authority to do. They understood this and waited for the Roman decision to do the crucifixion.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 14:56-59

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 27:18

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 53:4

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 3:17-19

<sup>21</sup> Romans 5:12-19 & 1 Corinthians 15:20-22; 45-49

<sup>22</sup> The imagery of the law had the guilty accused of sins by hands being placed on their heads, Leviticus 20:9 & 24:14. The ritual of imputing sin to another, in this case a live goat, involves placing hands on the head of the substitute who will die in the place of the sinner, Leviticus 16:21.

<sup>23</sup> Pouring blood at the base of the altar appears five times in Leviticus 4.

## The Humiliation Factor

Sin brings humiliation. If Adam had obeyed, all mankind would have enjoyed the dignity of glory and honor.<sup>24</sup> Entering our humanity as our Substitute, Jesus took not only guilt and death, but the full measure of what our sin brought us. He would have sin's indignity. He would have the opposite of glory. Therefore He would 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.<sup>25</sup> The Son of God died in a way no film or portrait has ever dared to show. He was 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 whole cup.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 rest of the world would consider it an entirely Jewish event. Crucifixion was a Roman message on Roman letterhead. Jesus was tried in a Roman court<sup>29</sup> 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<sup>30</sup> rejected their king, the Son of David. 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 Jewish contempt for the Messiah was a rejection shared by the world.<sup>31</sup> It was not just "the Jews" (see footnote); *the rulers of this age* [who participated in His death] ... *did not understand, for if they had, they*<sup>32</sup> *would not have crucified the Lord of glory* (1 Corinthians 2:8). Scripture teaches a universal rejection of Christ and a universal ignorance of Him unless one is born of the Spirit<sup>33</sup> and the mind is opened to receive things the Holy Spirit reveals (1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

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<sup>24</sup> Compare Hebrews 2 with Psalm 8

<sup>25</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>26</sup> Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>27</sup> Compare Isaiah 51:17-23; Jeremiah 25:15-29 and Luke 22:42.

<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 12:2; Luke 9:43-45

<sup>29</sup> John 19:28

<sup>30</sup> **"The Jews"** Note that "the Jews" in the Gospel of John is a shorthand term for referring to the leadership of the nation: *"the elders, the chief priests and scribes"* of Matthew 16:21. But we must include the Pharisees and Herodians who wanted to destroy Him, (Mark 3:6). The Sadducees dominated the Sanhedrin, and Mark 14:55 says the whole Council was *"seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death."* So "the Jews" of John 5:18 who sought to kill Him, are simply the leaders. Not all His covenant people rejected Him. John 1:10,11 is followed by 1:12 & 13! Each apostle was a Jew, as were those who believed in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. The Bible is not Anti-Semitic, as Romans 10:1 makes plain.

<sup>31</sup> See Psalm 2 and Acts 2: 23 & 4:24-28

<sup>32</sup> The 'they' cannot be limited to Jews in this verse.

<sup>33</sup> John 3:3-8

## **A United Rebellion**

It helps us not to love the world when we see the world's true colors.<sup>34</sup> A Roman death at the instigation of the Jews brought together 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? Roman complicity in Jewish stoning would not carry the same significance. To show a world against God, their hand was also needed in His death.

## **Enhancing the Gospel**

By bloodshed a sacrifice conveyed substitution, by 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.<sup>35</sup> Later, they had the tomb guarded and sealed;<sup>36</sup> they thought that would prevent his body from being stolen. What they prevented was all credibility of their later argument that it had been stolen. It appeared all was going their way. Actually, it was going God's.

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." 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 3:10-14)

Cursing like blessing is done by mouth (James 3:8-10). Blessing is commanded, cursing prohibited. Vengeance belongs to the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35-43). To curse is to step into the role of God. Only the Lord has the right to curse. Only God has the holiness for it to be a cleansing act. When we bless we speak of what we hope to see. When God blesses He produces the blessing He speaks. He said, "Let there be light" and there was. If we speak that way, nothing happens. For the Lord, blessing and cursing are the delivery of His will. The curse of God was exacted on the cross, and for this reason the Righteous One cried, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken Me?" Condemnation to death was God's legal sentence on the sinner, and the curse was God's execution of that sentence. The curse for us is over; it has fallen on Christ. We believe the gospel that if we come to Him, that curse for us has been exercised on the cross and replaced with blessing.

## **Proclaiming the Gospel**

After the resurrection the apostles then went on to proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection. They drew a powerful contrast between what men did to Him and what God did to Him.<sup>37</sup> They never avoided that 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 Jesus Christ as One Who died, but "*Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*"<sup>38</sup> Peter referred to the cross as a *tree*,<sup>39</sup> a choice of word designed to connect with the text in Deuteronomy 21.

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<sup>34</sup> 1 John 2:15-17

<sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 28:62-66

<sup>37</sup> Acts 2:23,24

<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2

<sup>39</sup> 1 Peter 2:24, a verse that means much to me, since it is engraved on my grandfather's gravestone.

## How the Apostle Read Deuteronomy

In Galatians 3 Paul quotes the part of Deuteronomy 21 that must have been in the minds of the Sanhedrin, "*Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.*" Follow his reasoning:

1. Everyone who does not obey the law is cursed.
2. No one has obeyed the law. (This not stated here but in Romans 3).
3. Christ redeemed us from that curse.
4. He did it by being cursed for us, *for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"*
5. **This curse is evident in the mode of Jesus' death.**
6. He redeemed by being cursed, so blessing (the opposite of a curse) would replace it.
7. His redemption is for Gentiles also. The promise of the Spirit comes even to Gentiles.
8. All of this benefit is received by faith.

## What the Death of Christ Means

The death of Jesus was a unique sacrifice which 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, absorbing His wrath against us for our sin. He took the curse from us and replaced it with blessing promised to the covenant people. He defeated the power of the devil and set all His people free. He removed the guilt of our sin from our record and brought us forgiveness. He reconciled God to us so that in repentance and faith we could be reconciled to God.

**The Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 39:** Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way? Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.

## Bearing our Cross

We are called upon to take up our cross and follow Him.<sup>40</sup> Carrying our cross is not penance. It never atones for sin. Serving Him will always entail suffering, a privilege we ought never to avoid.<sup>41</sup> It is a way to side with Christ in a world that opposes Him. We cannot be friends with the world.<sup>42</sup> It crucified Christ, and it will reject us too as we are loyal to Him.<sup>43</sup> Because He was cursed for us, 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 in it are promised to Christ.<sup>44</sup> Their redemption can only come by the crucifixion they imposed on the One they rejected. Salvation has come to many and will come to more. God in grace 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.*" [Then John added] *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 them, but for us who are being saved it is the power of God to salvation.<sup>45</sup> Jesus took our shame, let us never be ashamed of Him,<sup>46</sup> but proud of Him and all He has accomplished, and grateful for the grace that planned it all. Nothing more is needed to satisfy God. All we need is Christ.

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<sup>40</sup> Matthew 16:24

<sup>41</sup> Philippians 1:29

<sup>42</sup> James 4:4

<sup>43</sup> John 15:18-21

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 2 & Isaiah 2:1-4

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18

<sup>46</sup> Mark 8:38