



Crucifixion: Who Did It? Was It Necessary?

by Garry E. Milley

“Pastor, why crucifixion? Couldn’t God just get over it? God doesn’t ask us to seek a sacrifice before we forgive others. Why can’t God forgive us without all the fuss about blood and sacrifice?” Interesting questions!

Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment in Jesus’ day. “Crucify” and “crucifixion” occur over four dozen times in our New Testament. The early Christians saw this cruel, barbaric act as having great theological significance. They insisted on this despite its being an obvious barrier to evangelism as evidenced in Paul’s comment: “...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”¹ Crucifixion was a public display of Rome’s raw power. It was never to be used on Roman citizens but reserved for enemies of the empire, military deserters, hardened criminals and the sexually perverse.

What would have crossed the minds of those who saw Jesus on the cross? Emptying only the disciples and the repentant thief, most would have seen Jesus as a deserving victim of Roman justice. After all, the book of Deuteronomy stated: “...anyone who is hung on a pole is under God’s curse.”² But, even in that verse Christians saw a truth fulfilled in Jesus’ death.

The Mosaic Law could neither save nor justify; it could only condemn. All law-breakers were under the curse of death, which was the penalty for breaking the law. Paul wrote to the Galatians, quoting Deuteronomy 27:26, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”³ He continued reflecting on Deuteronomy: “Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because ‘the righteous will live by faith.’” 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 pole.” 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.”⁴

Who was behind it?

Crucifixion was uniformly a negative and despicable event. Yet, ironically, for the Christian community it could hardly be more positive because it was associated with God’s eternal purposes in Christ. Blaming the Jews is a sad and regrettable part of Church history. To counter that, the church has often redirected the blame to the Romans. And, despite any part that was played by any human, behind it all is the sovereign plan of God. In the first sermon after Pentecost, Peter tried to make this clear. While acknowledging that wicked people did it, he said: “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”⁵ Jesus had already taught that on the road to Emmaus. It was necessary that he was to suffer and rise again. Moses and the all the prophets spoke about it.⁶ God was behind it all the time.

Jesus was not a victim of Roman justice. He said, “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”⁷ In the Garden of Gethsemane, before the crucifixion, Jesus acknowledges that it was “God’s will” even though he prayed that if it were possible that the cup would pass him by.⁸ God’s will was behind it.

The apostle Peter knew that, too. He said, “...you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without

blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.”⁹ God’s sovereign choice was behind it.

Was it necessary?

Jesus’ death was placed in the context of the Temple language of sacrifice and offering. “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”¹⁰ Messiah’s death was an “offering for sin.”¹¹

Was it necessary? The author of Hebrews thought so. “[Moses] said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’” In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”¹² Jesus’ direct words in Matthew 26:28 influenced that author. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Best of all, this horrible event of crucifixion was for us and for our salvation. Romans 4:25 states, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Paul further stated in Romans 8:31-32: “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Those who accuse Paul of theologizing Jesus overplay a few verses to the neglect of others. Their criticisms seem a bit self-serving as if they were saying, “Let’s blame Paul, Hellenistic philosophy, and naive literalists for messing up social justice with blood and sacrifice. Let’s go with the latest theory.” It makes for a good chat but is ultimately unfruitful because any other option requires the forsaking of the plain language of Scripture.

Why not stay with the view of Jesus, the Temple language of sacrifice and offering, and behind it all, a sovereign plan of God? If it was necessary that Christ die as he did, let’s rejoice that it was for us and for our salvation that he died. We do not glorify the trauma of the crucifixion but the triumph of the cross.

1. 1 Cor. 1:23 NIV

2. Deut. 21:23

3. Gal. 3:10

4. Gal. 3:11-14

5. Acts 2:23

6. Lk. 24: 26-27; 44-47

7. Mt. 26:24

8. Mt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:40-46

9. 1 Pt. 1:18-20

10. Lev. 17:11

11. Is. 53:10

12. Heb. 9:20-22



Dr. Garry E. Milley is the Lead Pastor of Church in the Oaks, London, ON.
Email: garrymilley@me.com