



---

Conducted by  
Alf Marsden

---

**“I have been told that crucifixion was a Roman way of execution, but Deuteronomy 21:22 says that cursed is everyone which hangeth on a tree (prophetically of Christ). Could you comment, please?”**

This is a good question because it gives us opportunity to correct one or two popular misconceptions regarding crucifixion. The Greek word for cross is *Stauros* and

denotes, primarily, an upright pale or stake. The victim would have his arms extended *above* his head and his hands together, the back of one hand in the palm of the other; the nail would then be driven through *both* hands near the wrists. The feet would also be together with the nail-driven through both feet. Such a death our Lord died. This method of execution was borrowed by both Greeks and Romans from the Phoenicians.

The T-shaped cross, of popular illustration, with the cross-piece lowered, was evidently used as the symbol of the god Tammuz. In the apostate ecclesiastical system of the mid-third century AD, pagans were admitted into the church in their unregenerate state and they brought with them many of their pagan symbols; hence the Tau or T with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the cross of Christ.

### The Deuteronomy Passage

The Deuteronomists were strict legalists. The Mosaic Law was burned into their hearts and minds; as we read, "And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as He hath commanded us" (Deut. 6:25). Such was their zeal for the Law.

It was natural, then, that they should observe the law regarding hanging on a tree, and I think we should note this scripture because of the subsequent statement made in the N.T., "And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death and thou hang him on a tree; his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day (for he that is hanged is accursed of God) that thy land be not defiled, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance" (Deut. 21:23). The important points to note here are (a) a man must have committed a sin worthy of death (b) he must be put to death (method of death not specified) (c) if he is hung on a tree he is accursed of God (d) his body must not remain hanging on the tree all night. We find the same sort of thing recorded in Joshua when Joshua had the five kings slain and then hung their bodies on five trees; they were cut down when the sun went down and their bodies cast into the cave where they have been hidden (Joshua 10:22-27). In view of what we have said, I think I would tend *not* to look upon the Deuteronomy passage as being truly prophetic of Christ because of the cardinal fact that Christ did *not* commit any sin, and so could not have committed a sin worthy of death. There must have been, therefore, some other important reason why Jesus was crucified.

### God's Righteousness

In his Roman letter, Paul argues the relative conditions of Gentiles and Jews. Regarding the Gentiles, who did not have the law of God, he argues that their consciences, even though prompting them to do right things sometimes, could never be an infallible guide *all* the time; furthermore, he shows them as having become so depraved that God gave them over to their depravity. They were sinners and unrighteous. Turning to the Jews he says, "What then? are we (the Jews) better than they (the Gentiles)? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:9, 10). So here we have a depressing picture of a creation totally steeped in sin. Law, obedience, and merit could not produce righteousness; the dictates of conscience could not produce righteousness. The curse of sin, and therefore of death, was upon all mankind.

But what was God to do? He loved His creation, even in its terminal condition of sin, so much that He wanted to show His mercy to them. But how to do it? To just pronounce the unrighteous righteous would be unjust by itself. But God's *mercy*

would not allow Him to leave man to his fate; at the same time. God's *justice* demanded some punishment for sin. The only possible way to save some was by the propitiatory offering of Christ and the call for faith on man's part. God could not let sin go as if it were a mere slip. God demanded the atonement and provided it. As Paul puts it, "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Not only had justice to be *done*, but God must *be seen* to be just by the whole world. The punishment was to be borne by Christ. The manifestation of the standard of God's righteousness was to be demonstrated by Christ. To do this, Christ had to be crucified. He had to hang on the tree.

### The Curse of the Law

In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul says, "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). The important words in this statement which are worthy of note are the words "continueth" and "all." We have seen that the Jews did not continue to do all of the things contained in the law and so they became a curse. Now the Judaizers were following Paul around and bewitching the Galatian Gentile christians to place their reliance upon that law which had been designated as a curse. Paul allied the perverters of the true gospel with the same curse that was upon the law, "If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9).

Paul then goes on to show how the curse was removed, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). Christ "redeemed" us literally means that He ransomed us or brought us back "out from under the curse of the law." When Paul uses the expression "being made a curse for us" he means that we were "under" the curse but Christ "covered" us or interposed Himself between the curse and us so taking the curse upon Himself. What a wonderful Saviour we have. Paul then makes reference to the scripture contained in Deuteronomy 21:23 but you will notice that he does not say on this occasion "Cursed (by God) is every one that hangeth on a tree." Christ would not and could not be cursed by God because He was the sinless offering for sin. The allusion here, as in the Deuteronomy and Joshua passages, was to the exposure of dead bodies on stakes or crosses; it had nothing to do with the attachment of sin to the Christ in any shape or form. Such an allusion would be monstrous, unthinkable, and intellectually unacceptable. You cannot cancel out sin by sin. Salvation now is by mercy, faith and grace. We receive Christ as a gift, or not at all.

Well, I hope that we might have said something useful on the subject. The whole subject of Justification by Faith is set out by Paul in his Roman letter where he reveals the acute and profound problem of God in dealing with a sinful and unrighteous world, but that is the subject of another study.