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Deuteronomy 21:22-23 “A Prophecy of the Cross”

Intro. Deuteronomy 21 addresses four areas of life that involve the righteous treatment of various persons. The last three are obsolete in the modern practice of most nations but they contain principles of righteousness that are timeless. The four principles of righteousness given here are these: The husband of the bride was not to be called to war the first year of marriage (vv.10-14). The unfavored second wife and her son were not to be mistreated (vv.15-17). The law prescribed the righteous judgment of a stubborn and rebellious son (vv.18-21). Finally, the law prescribed the righteous treatment of the body of a condemned criminal. This last regulation became in essence of prophecy of what Jesus would endure, and what would happen to His body.

As we prepare for the Lord’s Supper today, I want us to reflect upon this prophecy and give thanks for all that Jesus was willing to suffer on our behalf. We are going to see today that He suffered more than we can imagine.

Now we are going to limit our focus primarily to the two verses of Scripture of our text. The first principle we see here is that:

I. SIN BRINGS JUDGMENT

God says in v.22, “If a man has committed a sin deserving of death....” The Hebrew text contains the word for “judgment” (*mishpat*), translated here “deserving.” Only those who were properly found guilty of a capital crime in a court of law were to be condemned to death. The immediate context gives an example of such a sin. A couple who had a stubborn and rebellious son, who was also a drunkard and glutton, was subject to being stoned to death by the community (vv.18-21). There are some sons and daughters of this community that would be glad that this law is no longer practiced! Murder is another sin mentioned in this chapter and elsewhere that was certainly worthy of death (19:6; 21:9). Other capital crimes mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy include idolatry (17:3-5), rape, adultery and even immorality (22:22-25). False prophets were to be put to death as well (13:5; 18:20). There were other sins listed elsewhere in the law of God that brought the judgment of death.

In a moral and righteous government, sin and crimes must be punished and blessing is to be bestowed upon those who practice righteousness (Rom. 13:1-4). When the appropriate consequence of both sin and righteousness is removed, all moral order falls apart.

Though in the law of God only a limited number of sins brought the sentence of death, the fact is that all sin ultimately leads to death. God told Adam and Eve that in the day they disobey Him and eat of the forbidden fruit they would surely die. Sure enough, the sentence of death not only came upon them, but also upon the whole human race. In fact, Romans 5:12 says, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.” The fact is we are all sinners deserving the death. Romans 6:23 says, “the wages of sin is death....” God said more than once in the book of Ezekiel, “the soul that sins shall die” (18:4, 20).

So we see the basic principle that sin brings judgment and condemnation. Now the question is what kind of judgment does sin bring? To answer that question, let us look into our text and see secondly:

II. THE MEANS OF JUDGMENT

For those guilty of capital crimes, the first consequence of such a sin is:

A. Death - We read in v.22, "If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death..." Note that he has been judged "deserving of death," so he would then be put to death.¹ He would not be allowed to live out his life but would have his life cut short.

The death penalty was often associated also with the judgment of:

B. Public Shame – God says in the last of v.22, "and you hang him on a tree." Hanging in a public place was practiced widely by both the Israelites and their neighbors as a means of execution (Josh. 8:23, 29; Esther 2:23; 5:14; 7:10; 8:7), or as we see here, as a public display after death (Gen. 40:19, 22; 2 Sam. 4:12; 21:12). I found at least 10 examples in the Old Testament. In the case of the Israelites, the offender was not hung on a tree as a means of execution, but rather after execution by stoning his dead body was hung on a tree for at least two purposes. First, as a means of bringing the ultimate shame for what he has done. You see, his body would be held up to public shame and ridicule, making the punishment even greater. Secondly, to serve as a warning to others of the serious consequences that happens to those who commit such crimes. They would make examples of those who committed such crimes, to act as a strong deterrent.

This had already been practiced after the terrible sin of idolatry associated with Baal of Peor. In Num. 25:4 we read, "Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." According to Joshua 8:29, Joshua obeyed this regulation scrupulously, even with reference to the defeated Canaanite king of Ai. He hung the king on a tree until evening, but at sunset he ordered the removal of the body. Apparently, he did the same with the kings of the southern Canaanite alliance (Josh. 10:26-27).

It is hard to believe, but in some countries, this practice is still being done today. Do you remember what happened in Felujah, Iraq back in 2004? They not only killed 4 Americans, but they hung their decapitated bodies from a bridge for all to see.

Yet in liberal societies, they seem to do their best to remove any shame from what the Bible describes as sin. Instead, they publicly shame you for holding biblical positions! There ought to be some shame associated with wrongdoing or people will be more likely to do wrong.

Yet another punishment associated with the judgment of sin is:

C. The Curse of Sin - God says in the last of v.23, "for he who is hanged is accursed of God."² A greater curse than this could hardly be imagined. The question may be asked, "Is the person cursed because his body is hung from a tree, or is he hung from a tree because he has suffered the curse of the sentence of death? The latter is probably true. The placing of the body on a tree was not that which made the person accursed, but was an external sign or token of his being in accursed one.

¹ The Hebrew verb is in the passive voice (Hophal).

² This is literally, "a curse of God." Instead of an objective genitive where God is cursed, the LXX rightly treats it as a subjective genitive, "for cursed by God is everyone hanged on a tree," so the LXX adds "on a tree." Paul affirms that interpretation in Galatians 3:13.

Beginning in Genesis 3, we see that sin brings a curse. The ground was cursed forcing man into hard labor. The woman would experience the curse of great pain in childbirth. In Deuteronomy 27 there is a long list of curses associated with sin. Then Deut. 27:26 summarizes the list by saying, “Cursed *is* the one who does not confirm *all* the words of this law by observing them.” Yes, we are all under the curse of sin to this very day, but those executed for crimes were especially cursed both in the eyes of God and the eyes of men as their bodies were hung up on a tree.

People tend to make light of sin, but here we see clear evidence of the fact that God does not treat sin lightly. As we have seen from our Scripture text today and other Scripture, sin is very serious, for it brings death, shame, and a curse. If you do nothing about your sin problem, you will not only die physically, but your soul will continue to be dead and separated from God (Eph. 2:1) for all eternity!

So let us cultivate the same kind of attitude towards sin as abhorrent to us as well.

What we read here seems harsh, especially by modern standards. Yet we also see in our text a truth that you may not realize. Here we see:

III. GOD’S GRACIOUS LIMITATION OF SUCH PUNISHMENT

In such cases described here, God commanded in v.23, “his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day....” Other nations would leave the bodies of condemned criminals to remain exposed in such a manner for days, allowing birds to pick at their flesh. Yet God limited such a practice to no later than late afternoon of the same day. Thus, as we have already noted, God was not necessarily commanding that condemned criminals bodies be hung up on a tree, but he was regulating a pre-existing practice.

God gives one reason for such a requirement in the last of v.23, “so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.” Keep in mind that the surrounding nations would keep the bodies of condemned criminals on public display for days. And God said in Leviticus 18:24, “Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled....” While in that chapter of Leviticus God was speaking of other sins, it is clear from our text that the principle applies to this practice as well. Also, in God’s law, dead bodies cause defilement (Lev. 21:11). Though allowing the practice for the purposes of imposing the shame of sin and to serve as a warning of judgment, God graciously limited this existing practice. To spare the relatives of the criminal further grief and to prevent animals from tearing and consuming the body, burying the corpse on the same day was the humane thing to do. Once buried and removed from sight, all was to be forgotten. God’s righteous judgment had been satisfied. Also, human beings, no matter how low morally, are still image-bearers of God, and the desecration of the image by mutilation of the body or allowing scavenging creatures to mutilate it was surely a biblical taboo.

There is a long tradition of giving proper care for the bodies of the dead. Here we see that even the bodies of criminals were to be given a proper burial not long after death. God is indeed gracious.

Now the main reason that I share this Scripture with you today is the fact the it is a prophecy of the fact that:

IV. CHRIST BORE PUNISHMENT IN OUR PLACE

Now I believe God included this law, for He could foresee that Jesus would die for our sins upon a cross made from a tree. At least five times in the New Testament the cross that Jesus

died on is called a “tree.” Why was that? In Galatians 3:13 the apostle Paul quotes this statement in the law and applies it to Christ. He also referenced this prophecy in Acts 13:29-30. Likewise, the apostle Peter no doubt referred to this prophecy in Acts 5:30 and 10:39 where he accused the Jews of killing Jesus by hanging him on a tree. The apostle Peter also referred to this prophecy in 1 Peter 2:24, “who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree....” Here is the explanation of what Jesus endured on that cross made from a tree. When He suffered and died on that cross, He was not suffering and dying for His sins. Instead, the Law-maker came and dwelt among the lawbreakers and became one with us. He took our sins upon Himself and on our behalf suffered the following penalties of sin that we see in this prophecy:

A. He Died for Us – We have seen that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). So through His death on the cross, Jesus Christ, the sinless sacrifice, atoned for our sins once and for all, thereby delivering us from the sentence of death that hangs over us all. Isa. 53:5 says, “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities....”

Not only did Jesus die for us, but we see in this prophecy that:

B. He Suffered Shame for Us - The fact that Jesus died on the cross made from a tree was in the providence of God. Many times in the Gospels we read of the fact that the Jews were intent on killing Jesus for various reasons. We even read that on several occasions they picked up stones to stone him to death (John 8:59; 10:31). Yet at this particular time in their history only the Romans had the authority to put someone to death. For those in subject nations, that involved death by crucifixion. To avoid punishment by the Romans, they pressured Rome to carry out the execution of Jesus, and they knew it would be carried out by means of crucifixion. If Jesus had been stoned to death, this prophecy would not have been fulfilled. But since the Romans were in charge, He was hung up and fastened on a cross before thousands of people who passed by during the busy Passover season.

Indeed, as Jesus hung on the cross, He certainly was held up for public shame in the worst possible manner. Heb. 6:6 referred to this reality when he said, “they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” Isaiah 53:12 says that Jesus “was numbered with the transgressors.” He was crucified with violent robbers and murders. For 6 hours Jesus hung on a cross, barely clothed, if at all, and exposed in shame to the many bypassers near a busy road leading in and out of Jerusalem. Mt. 27:39 says, “And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads.” Jesus experience for you and for me the shame and humiliation of being held up for ridicule, dying a criminal’s death. Yet the amazing thing is that Jesus was willing to face such shame and ridicule, not after His death, but while He was still alive on that cross.

There are three references to the tree of life in the book of Revelation (2:7; 22:2, 14). I would have to say that in the case of Jesus, a tree of death became the tree of life for us!

C. He Bore the Curse for Us – Again, the last of v.23 says, “he who is hanged is accursed of God.” Yes, the curse of sin weighed fully upon the Son of God. Paul said in 2 Cor. 5:21, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us....” Because He was innocent and sinless, He could die on behalf of those who have sinned, and so absorb their curse. Jesus suffered, died and bore the curse in our place.

This was even illustrated by the crown of thorns that He wore upon that cross. In Genesis 3 the ground was cursed because of man’s sin. As a result, Genesis 3:18 says, “Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you....” The curse of the thorns was thrust deeply into his scalp, drawing blood and causing barbs of pain.

So having borne the curse upon Himself, He can remove the curse from us! And with the curse being removed, the way is prepared for us to receive the blessing of God instead. Do you see how much Jesus loves you, that He would be willing to be cursed in such a way for you? Let us rely wholly on the saving work of the Son of God on our behalf. Let us also praise both the righteousness of God as seen in the punishment of sin, as well as the grace of God in providing His Son to bear that punishment in our place.

So again, we see from our text the seriousness of sin. We should not treat sin lightly. As we see in the brutal suffering of Jesus on our behalf, we have even less excuse to treat sin lightly. Look into the cup that Jesus drank for you, and you will see the horror of sin, and the horror of the curse. I wouldn't go another day treating sin lightly. I would repent of sin, and seek the forgiveness that Christ provided for you on the cross.

We see one more truth about Jesus that is revealed in this prophecy:

D. He Was Buried Before Sundown – Normally, the Romans would leave crucified victims on the crosses for days, even for a while after they died. But the leaders of Israel insisted that the body of Jesus and the two others not remain on the crosses during such a high and holy Sabbath.³ So in fulfillment of the prophecy of this Scripture (v.23), Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried before sundown. This was largely due to the fact that He died on Passover, and the Sabbath was the next day. So without thinking about fulfilling prophecy, they did so when they asked that the bodies be removed before sundown. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy in every detail. Surely, He must be the Savior that God has provided for us!

Conclusion: Have you sinned against God? Then apart from Jesus you are under the curse of sin and death. God sent Jesus to bear the judgment of sin in your place: the judgment of death, of shame, and the curse. If you have not done so, I call upon you to repent of your sins and trust in Jesus who died for you! And those of us who have already made that commitment should thank God both with our words and our lives for what He has done for us.

Sources: Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; Stephen Felker (notes from his sermon on Galatians 3:13-14); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Eugene H. Merrill, *New American Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); H. D. M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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³ John 19:31, “Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.”