



Deut 21:22-23

Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree

22 " If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,

23 "his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.

Once again, in expositing the sixth commandment, and in particular the laws regarding capital punishment, Moses now gives some important instruction regarding the hanging of the body of an executed criminal.

This does not refer to killing someone on a tree by hanging or crucifixion, for the common method of execution was stoning. But it was a common practice at this time to leave the bodies of the executed suspended as a warning to others. For instance kids, you may have seen in old movies the terrifying image of a skeleton hanging in a cage, this was the body of an executed criminal, that instead of being buried had been hung up to warn others against committing his crime. We don't obviously still do this today, but it used to be the case that all the bodies of traitors and other executed criminals were subjected to this kind of desecration. For instance, at many of England's southern ports, in the Caribbean Islands and the American Colonies ships arriving in harbor were greeted by the bodies of men who had been executed for piracy and then hung up in chains or gibbeted as a warning to sailors not to think about turning to piracy themselves.

The practice of hanging up bodies was also found in wartime, when many nations did it to their enemies. The Philistines, for instance, did this to the bodies of Saul and His Sons

1 Samuel 31:10 Then they put his armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth Shan.

The Israelites did this too, however they remembered the words of the Lord not to leave them hanging so for instance, we read of that Joshua remembered and obeyed these instructions:

Josh 8:29 And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until evening. And as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his corpse down from the tree, cast it at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raise over it a great heap of stones that remains to this day.

And then regarding the five kings of the confederation that attempted to destroy Israel:

Joshua 10: 26 And afterward Joshua struck them and killed them, and hanged them on five trees; and they were hanging on the trees until evening.

But those were all cases that occurred in a military setting, what is being spoken of here primarily deals with a man - and this was something only done to male criminals - who has been executed for breaking the laws punishable by death. A man who has violated the law of God and is thus under God's wrath and curse for violating the covenant. As Peter Craigie put it *"To break the law of God and live as though he did not matter or exist, was in effect to curse him; and he who cursed God would be accursed of God."*

Now this practice of hanging the body to show that the executed one was under God's wrath and curse was not an invention of Moses. God himself had commanded that this be done to those who had broken the covenant at Baal Peor - *Numbers 25:1 Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab.*

2 They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

3 So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.

4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "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."

To leave the bodies hanging, though, would have *polluted* the land, made it ceremonially unclean. Therefore this law stipulates that at whatever time of the day the bodies were put on the tree, at sunset they should be taken down and buried. The point regarding the curse of the law had been made, and there was no need to extend the punishment further. In fact Matthew Henry makes the excellent point: **"Punishing beyond death God reserves to himself; as for man, there is no more that he can do."**

Now if we understand this practice we can understand the request of the Jews to Pilate to break the legs of those who had been crucified with Christ before the Passover Sabbath:

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.

32 Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him.

33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.

34 But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.

35 And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.

They broke their legs incidentally, because then the criminal could no longer push himself up on the crucifix and slumping down he would not be able to draw in air and would suffocate.

Calvin notes the irony of the Jews request to Pilate: *"Their consciences were not wounded by the murder of Jesus, but they were greatly moved by the fear of ceremonial pollution. Religious scruples may live in a dead conscience. Alas! this is not the only proof of that fact: we could find many in our own day."*

Now that brings us to the first and undoubtedly the most important application in this sermon. God did not merely give this law as a means of warning those who broke his laws in the days of Moses and as a means also of preventing a callous and unnecessary disrespect for the body.

If we can understand this practice of hanging up on the tree to show that the person is under God's wrath and curse for having broken his law and is suffering the penalty for doing so then we can understand the incredible importance of what Paul wrote in Gal. 3:13-14 -

Gal. 3:13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Hence the crucifixion and Christ's being lifted up on the cross was no accident. Not only did hearken back to the bronze serpent in the wilderness in Numbers 21:9 whom Moses lifted up on a pole that those under God's curse who had been bitten by serpents might look to it and live. It also directly teaches us that Jesus who himself knew no sin and never broke the law, had become accursed *for us* who were breakers of the Law of God. Matthew Henry notes well that "***it is the highest degree of disgrace and reproach that can be done to a man, and proclaims him under the curse of God as much as any external punishment can. Those that see him thus hang between heaven and earth will conclude him abandoned of both and unworthy of either***"

Friends all of us, are guilty of transgressing God's law and thus all of us are under God's wrath and curse, we have all broken the covenant and thus there was no other way we could be saved except that someone who was both man (that he might represent us) and God (that he might provide an atonement of infinite worth) would die in our place. So Christ, the only begotten Son of God, willing took our place and endured the curse for us, in order that we might receive God's blessing:

2 Cor. 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

It was also in keeping with God's teaching and redeeming purposes that Christ should only hang on the cross till Sunset. In being hung up on the cross we are taught that Christ suffered the curse in our place. But having suffered and removed our guilt, the law was satisfied, as Jesus himself proclaimed in his last WORD before dying - "***Tetelostai***" it is finished PAID IN FULL. The law's demands have been satisfied. And so the law could demand no more. At that point, Jesus ceased to be a curse, and we with him. Now the body could be taken down and buried, we had been washed and cleansed by the atonement Christ made in our place.

2nd Application – If we understand this then we will understand the problem with Roman Catholic Crucifixes that depict Christ as still hanging and cursed. More importantly we will understand the problem with the Roman Catholic sacrifice of the Mass in which the body of Christ is broken again, and his blood was again poured out again and again and again as if the curse remains and needs to be borne endlessly. It returns Christ to his estate of Humiliation again and again and is a blasphemous denial of His ONCE FOR ALL sacrifice clearly spelled out in Hebrews:

Heb. 10:10 By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

11 And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God,

13 from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool.

It was for this reason that the Reformers utterly rejected the mass pointing out that his atoning work was completed forever and not extended through time as Roman Catholicism maintains. And that is why we confess in Chapter 29 of the Westminster Confession regarding the Lord's Supper:

II. In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead;[2] but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God, for the same:[3] so that the popish sacrifice of the mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of his elect.[4]

The third application is very simple: Just as looking to the bronze serpent was the only way that those who had been bitten could be saved. So looking to Christ in faith is the only way we can be saved. It is only if you have been united to Him by faith, that you have been redeemed from the curse of the law. If not, you are still under it, and will pay the penalty for its transgression yourself. There was and remains no other way of salvation. Either Christ bore your sins in his body on the tree or you still bear them.