

## Chapter 7 - What was Nailed to the Cross?

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**When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. . . .**

– Colossians 2:13,14

Since His death and resurrection, believers in Jesus have discussed the question, “What was nailed to the cross?” The simplicity of the question belies the enormity of this subject. This question ultimately concerns each follower of Jesus because the answer reflects our understanding of God’s actions and ultimately, His will. Even though there is a relatively simple answer to the question, the process of getting to the answer requires a working knowledge of the Bible and a great deal of commitment to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

For years the disciples of Jesus struggled with the question of what changed at the cross. Their interest was not merely academic for the answer can have profound social and behavioral consequences. (See Acts 15, Galatians 2 and 2 Corinthians 11.) Although there are hints in the Old Testament that help us understand what was nailed to the cross, Jesus spoke through the Apostle Paul ( 2 Corinthians 12) to make sure His followers had information sufficient to reach the right answer.

### **Social Ramifications**

At times in Earth’s history, following Jesus has taken a lot of courage. For the sake of illustration, the following is a fictitious scenario that generally conforms to the beliefs of most Christians today. Even though this scenario does not represent my views, it has merit because it demonstrates certain things that could have happened if *all* of the laws and statutes given in the Old Testament were made void on the Friday afternoon that Jesus died.

Such a dramatic change would have put Jewish converts to Christianity in a very difficult situation because fourteen hundred years of culture and religious practice would have suddenly become worthless. A paradigm shift of this magnitude would be extremely hard, if not impossible for converts to accept. With these thoughts in mind, consider the following scenario: Benjamin was a devout Jew from the tribe of Judah. He was a curious middle-aged man (like Nicodemus) who frequently listened to Jesus.

As time passed, Benjamin became favorable to the idea that Jesus could be the predicted Messiah, but he was not sure. Benjamin was an eye witness to the death and ascension of Jesus. Benjamin saw the fiery manifestations of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost! Finally, after Benjamin witnessed the stoning of Stephen, he decided that Jesus had to be the promised Messiah.

He told his family and friends that he was converting to Christianity on the basis of what the prophets had foretold, as well as the things that he had seen with his own eyes. Assuming that Benjamin immediately began to interpret the will of God as Christians do today, consider some of the religious and social ramifications that Benjamin faced.

As a “born again” Christian, Benjamin was *suddenly* free of the old covenant, so Benjamin stopped taking animal sacrifices to the temple. He stopped supporting the priests and the temple with his tithes and offerings. Benjamin refused to have his newborn son circumcised because his son could be an heir of Abraham without circumcision. Benjamin told his relatives and friends that the office of high priest in Jerusalem was worthless because man’s High Priest had ascended to Heaven.

Benjamin told his family that pork and shrimp, among other things, were no longer unclean. Benjamin started working on the seventh day Sabbath. He began attending worship services with Gentiles on Sunday. Benjamin refused to observe the feast days or attend Jewish assemblies. In short, when Benjamin became a Christian, he was set free of the culture and religion he had known all his life and most everyone who knew him refused to even speak to him.

There is a feature within all religions that says, “If you are not one of us, you are against us.” (Mark 9:40) Given the polemical nature of religion, is it little wonder that Jewish relatives persecuted early Christians? It is likely that Benjamin’s business was either boycotted or burned because he became a traitor, a “Gentile lover.” Eventually, there was no safe place in Jerusalem for Benjamin. He fled to Damascus because the Pharisee, Saul, had heard of his defection from Judaism.

How does a man endure the hatred of everyone he has ever known? How does a Jew suddenly lose his denigrating bias toward Gentiles and consider them to be equals in the Lord? These matters are not exaggerated. If anything, they are understated. There is no greater conflict than that of religious differences. We live in an age when it takes an average of 18 years to put a man to death for first degree murder, but in Benjamin’s day, a person could be stoned *the same day* he spoke out against the high priest. All of the issues presented in this scenario are discussed in the New Testament because becoming a Christian during the first century A.D. was not an easy decision, especially if the individual was born a Jew.

## **Not Representative**

This scenario about Benjamin **does not** represent how Christians began to act the week after Jesus rose from the dead. A person cannot change his or her religion or religious practices in a week. On the other hand, Benjamin’s scenario demonstrates what many Christians think was nailed to the cross. However, the New Testament reveals an interesting fact. It took many years and many intense discussions before the disciples of Jesus figured out what was nailed to the cross. Why did (and why does) God permit so much ambiguity on this question?

First, if Jesus had declared the facts from the cross as He did from Mt. Sinai few, if any, Jews

would have been able to accept the truth. Jesus often spoke in parables so that the people would consider and think about His words rather than be offended by His words. ( Matthew 13:11-13) Second, the answer to, "What was nailed to the cross" requires more than a theological answer. At Mt. Sinai, God's will was plainly stated. ( Deuteronomy 30:12-15)

The history of the Jews confirms that no man can measure up to the will of God. A close look at Jewish history from the Bible reveals an interesting fact. The Jews were either in total rebellion to the "plainly stated will of God" or they made the "plainly stated will of God" a legalistic burden which no one could fulfill. The failure of the Jews explains why God has left the answer of what was nailed to the cross up to the individual. You can answer the question in whatever way you wish. Of course, your answer may have nothing to do with the truth. God knows that if you do not want to know the truth, there is no point in revealing the truth to you.

However, if the Holy Spirit is leading you, and you are an honest seeker for truth; if you are a born-again follower of Jesus Christ, you have a hunger and thirst for the whole truth. On this basis, according to God's grace, you are going to discover the truth that God has hidden and joyfully apply it in your life. Jesus has promised this! Jesus told His disciples, "**But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . .**" ( Matthew 13:11) "**. . . The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.**" ( John 16:13)

## The Womb of Judaism

Jesus was a Jew and so were His disciples, so there is no denying that Christianity began in the womb of Judaism. Peer pressure and social conformity have enormous staying power over people. This is why less than 5% of Earth's population converts from their original religious system to another. Therefore, a sudden revelation of all that was nailed to the cross would have been too much at one time for any Jew to thoughtfully consider.

Early Jewish converts to Christianity struggled with the question of what was nailed to the cross for years *because* the social consequences were enormous in the family and in the community. ( Acts 15) Even after making the transition to Christianity, converts could not make a clean break from their past, culture, traditions or beliefs. Jewish converts carried a lot of Jewish baggage with them into the early Christian faith.

Often, the Apostle Paul modified his social conduct to conform to each situation in which he found himself. For example, when he was in Corinth, he lived like a Corinthian. He behaved like a Jew when he was in Jerusalem. ( 1 Corinthians 9:20-23) Because of its Jewish origin it seemed that Christianity might remain a sect within Judaism, but God had other plans. The Romans surrounded Jerusalem and Titus destroyed it in A.D. 70. This event forced Christians to scatter toward the four corners of the Earth and pushed Christianity out of the womb of Judaism.

## The Empire Was Prepared

Thirty-five years before Jerusalem was destroyed, Jesus chose a man whose heart was right and his head was wrong, to become His spokesperson to the Gentiles. After Saul was converted on the road to Damascus, he became an unstoppable ambassador for Jesus. The Apostle Paul prepared the Roman empire for the dispersion of Christians. Paul traveled extensively throughout the Roman empire carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul established many early churches and on the basis of several revelations from Jesus, Paul laid a theological foundation that explains how God viewed believers in Christ as the heirs of Abraham. As Gentile men and women joined the Christian faith they naturally brought Gentile baggage into the Christian faith with them just as their Jewish counterparts had done in Jerusalem. (This baggage is often the primary reason for Paul's epistles.) In all cases and in each locale, the end result was a hybrid religion – not entirely Christian, Jewish, Grecian, Egyptian or Roman.

This religious baggage explains why early Christianity fractured on a many theological issues. Jewish converts were concerned with many of Jewish issues that converts to Christianity in Rome or Alexandria did not have. History confirms that early Christians did not have an absolute answer to the question, "What was nailed to the cross?" Instead, their answers were the result of processing selected epistles of the apostles, Old Testament study, and social ramifications.

Church history demonstrates that specific answers were *constructed* to suit the needs of Christians in their respective parts of the world. Remember, the New Testament was not compiled until the middle of the fourth century so early Christians had to use the Old Testament to verify Paul's claims. ( Acts 17:11) Strange as it may sound, variances on the question of what changed at the cross ultimately caused Christians in one region of the world to become opposed, even hostile toward believers in other parts of the world. Church history confirms that the Christian community has not been in one accord since the Pentecost that followed the ascension of Christ. ( Acts 1:14; 2:1)

## **A Need for Sameness**

By the end of the second century A.D., the Christian Church was growing strong in the North, South and East. The northern version of Christianity was centered in Rome, the southern version was centered in Alexandria, Egypt and the eastern version was centered in the churches of Asia Minor. Each respective area had its own version (or perversion, if you will) of Christianity. If we mix the ancient modes of transportation, the vast distances and the lack of communication between Christians along with the religious baggage carried into regional churches, it is easy to see why major theological differences developed within the Christian movement. About A.D. 312, Constantine became the sole emperor of Rome.

The unity of the empire was waning because ethnic populations had changed the political demographics of the world, but Christianity seemed impervious to ethnicity. Although independent of each other, Christian groups were gaining in presence and popularity throughout the empire. Constantine was a brilliant strategist and he saw an opportunity to strengthen and

reunify the Roman empire through a political arrangement with Christians. He saw that Christianity needed a centralized authority or it would fracture and suffer the consequences of the empire.

Therefore, he converted to Christianity and adopted religion as a formal vehicle through which his empire could be unified and his authority consolidated. Of course, Christians in Rome were very pleased with Constantine's interest. They had been persecuted and treated badly for a long time. Now, Christians began to enjoy the sunshine of the emperor's favor. Well educated and skillful Christian leaders in Rome became intimate advisers to Constantine and they "adjusted" Christian doctrine on an *ad hoc* basis to meet the needs of the Romans and most of all, the ambitious goals of Constantine.

## Unequals in the Lord

About a hundred and fifty years before Constantine became emperor, Christians in the South and East began to complain that the bishop at Rome should stop trying to impose his views on other Christians. The bishop at Rome gained higher authority than other bishops for three reasons: First, the church at Rome developed into the largest church system. Therefore, the bishop at Rome directed the largest body of Christians.

Second, the city of Rome was the world's center for advanced education at that time. Many of the converts in Rome were well educated and they had wealth and influence. Third, as the office of bishop rose to administrative importance in Rome's version of Christianity, Christians in Rome accepted the necessity of a hierarchy that was similar to the hierarchy of Roman government. These factors helped propel the bishop of Rome into the position of "chief spokesman" for Christians before Constantine came to power.

Because the Romans did not bestow power and authority on religious leaders, the bishop at Rome could not enforce his declarations nor control the universal Christian church. But, the Romans did bestow divine power and divine authority upon Caesar. The church at Rome obviously understood the importance that Caesar could play in their cause and they carefully sought to win the favor of the emperors through flattery. Their motto was, "Convert the king, and the kingdom will follow."

When Constantine arrived on the scene in A.D. 312, the extensive presence of Christianity throughout the empire and its hierarchical structure were political grapes, "ripe for the picking." The union between Constantine and the church at Rome looked like "a marriage made in Heaven." The church at Rome needed his unimpeachable authority and Constantine needed the unifying force of religion. This marriage produced one offspring, known as the Holy Roman Empire.

## First Sunday after the First Full Moon after the Spring Equinox

The observance of Easter is first noted in church history about the middle of the second century A.D. Prior to this time, it is probable that Jewish converts observed the anniversary of Christ's

death and resurrection at the time of Passover (Nisan 14/15). As Christianity diversified and more religious baggage was introduced into Christianity, the observance of Christ's death and resurrection became associated with pagan fertility rites (Easter eggs and bunny rabbits).

Because Jewish converts insisted on observing the death and resurrection of Jesus at the time of Passover, a serious dispute arose. Christians, principally those in Rome (Pope Pius I, A.D. 142-154), insisted on a perpetual Sunday observance for Easter, the day that Jesus rose from the tomb. The pope insisted that it was more appropriate to celebrate the day of Christ's resurrection instead of the day of His death. But, a Sunday celebration did not solve the whole problem.

Which Sunday should be celebrated for Easter? Depending upon the phases of the moon, Passover can vary about 29 days. Should Christians observe the Sunday following the Jewish Passover each year in order to stay close to the date of Christ's resurrection or should they fix an absolute date for Easter?

The bishop at Rome decided that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday that followed the first full moon following the Spring Equinox. His declaration caused a significant schism in the church because Jewish converts in the East and South wanted to keep the day of the resurrection tied to the date of Passover. Because the day of Passover wanders through the weekly cycle, Christ's resurrection could be celebrated on a Tuesday or Friday, etc.

The pope's method of determining Easter would eliminate any dependency upon the Jewish calendar. At church councils, Pope Pius I threatened those churches who stood in opposition with excommunication if they failed to accept his decision. This show of force splintered the early Christian community for many years. When Constantine became emperor, the controversy over the time for Easter was still ongoing because no one had enough authority over all of the Christian churches to silence opposition. Given this background information, consider the provocative words of Constantine in June, A.D. 325 when he defended and defined Christian doctrine. Especially notice his reasoning:

When the question relative to the [timing of the] sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the [dating] custom of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded.

In rejecting their custom [of determining the date for Passover], we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter, which we have observed from the time of the Savior's Passion to the present day. We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course; and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep

this feast [at the proper time].

How can they be in the right, they who, after the death of the Savior, have no longer been led by reason but by wild violence, as their delusions may urge them? They do not possess the truth in this Easter question; for in their blindness and repugnance to all improvement, they frequently celebrate two Passovers in the same year.

We could not imitate those who are openly in error. How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are most certainly blinded by error? For to celebrate the Passover twice in one year is totally inadmissible. But even if this were not so, it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people. Besides, consider well, that in such an important matter, and on a subject of such great solemnity, there ought not to be any division.

Our Savior has left us only one festal day of our redemption, that is to say, of his holy passion, and he desired [to establish] only one Catholic [universal] Church. Think, then how unseemly it is, that on the same day some should be fasting whilst others are seated at a banquet; and that after Easter, some should be rejoicing at feasts, whilst others are still observing a strict fast.

For this reason, a Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way; and everyone, I hope, will agree upon this point. As, on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord; and as, on the other, the custom now followed by the Churches of the West, of the South, and of the North, and by some of those of the East, is the most acceptable, it has appeared good to all; and I have been guaranteed for your consent, that you would accept it with joy, as it is followed at Rome . . . . Make known to your brethren what has been decreed, keep this most holy day according to the prescribed mode; we can thus celebrate this holy Easter day at the same time, if it is granted me, as I desire, to unite myself with you; we can rejoice together; seeing that the divine power has made use of our instrumentality for destroying the evil designs of the devil . . . . (Eusebius, Vita Const., Lib iii., 18-20, insertions in brackets are mine.)

This quotation confirms three things;

First, the importance of Easter observance and the dating of Easter are contrived issues. The Bible does not mandate an Easter observance and Constantine does not appeal to Scripture for authority.

Second, any association with the “repugnant” Jews for dating Easter was unconscionable to Constantine. He plainly says so. Last, Constantine decreed that Easter be celebrated on the same Sunday for all Christians and he claims this is the will of “a Divine Providence.” This last comment, no doubt, was designed to silence the argument. The formula for dating Easter advanced by Pope Pius I proved to be successful for four reasons. First, it eliminated any dependency on “those repugnant Jews” for the timing of Easter. It kept Easter Sunday as close as possible to the season when Jesus died and rose from the tomb (near the time of a full moon).

Third, the celebration of Easter on Sunday supported the growing importance of Sunday

sacredness among Roman Christians and last, Constantine liked the idea and simply resolved a theological problem by edict. In so doing, he affirmed the desires of the bishop of Rome. The bishop was happy and Constantine was happy.

Problem solved.

Hopefully, after reading the past few pages, you can understand how some Christian doctrines and practice came to be. This background has been presented to demonstrate three things. First, anti-Semitism was a powerful influence in matters of theology and practice in early church history. A significant number of Christian traditions (like the observance of Easter) are responses born out of anti-Semitism instead of Scripture.

Second, the answer to “What was nailed to the Cross?” is not as plainly stated in the Bible as the Ten Commandments, but every seeker for truth has enough information in the Bible to correctly answer the question. Last, the bishop of Rome came to a place where he presumed to have the authority to dictate the will of God for all other Christians. In essence, the church at Rome answered the question by concluding that *everything Jewish* was nailed to the cross.

There is a twist of irony in this story. The position of the Catholic Church on the question of what was nailed to the cross directly affects most Protestants. Whereas Catholics claim that the pope and church leaders have the authority to determine all matters regarding religious practice, Protestants claim the Bible is their only authority in matters of religious practice.

Because Protestantism came out of the womb of Catholicism, Protestantism has a lot of Catholic baggage mixed into its theology. Ironically, those Protestants who defend the decisions of the church at Rome are left holding the bag. A Bible student cannot use Bible texts to justify a number of decisions which originated on the basis of anti-Semitism. We have seen in this chapter that the church at Rome dissociated Easter from the Passover *of the Jews* because the Romans had nothing but contempt for the Jews.

Later in this book, it will be shown the same is also true for the Ten Commandments. The church at Rome declared the seventh day Sabbath to be null and void because it was the Sabbath *of the Jews* and in its place, Sunday was substituted.