

INTRODUCTION

Easter is only two weeks away. Next Sunday, NY Times bestselling author, Joel Rosenberg, will be back with us. He'll be speaking in the Sunday morning services and at 5:30 I'll interview about his latest book and about events in the Middle East in light of Biblical prophecy.

We've been counting down the 94 hours that changed the world. The countdown started at the Last Supper and ends on Easter Sunday morning when the empty tomb is discovered. In this message, I'm going to talk about "CSI Golgotha." I'll be answering the question, "Who killed Jesus?"

One of the most popular television shows of recent history is CSI, which stands for Crime Scene Investigation. That's actually a fictional title, because the actual law enforcement term is Crime Scene Analysis. Maybe the producers thought CSA sounded too much like the Confederate States of America.

On television, CSI is about a team of experts who examine a crime scene. They use the forensic evidence to determine the nature of the crime, and hopefully leads them to the guilty party. In this message we could say CSI stands for Cross Scene Investigation. I want us to visit the scene of the crucifixion and look for clues about who was or is actually guilty of crucifying Jesus. After 2,000 years, there's not a lot of forensic evidence, but we have several eyewitness accounts. Tradition tells us that Mark is relating the gospel as told to him by Simon Peter.

Mark 15:21-39: "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!' In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.' Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him."

"At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of those standing near heard this, they said, 'Listen, he's calling Elijah.' One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 'Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,' he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'"

Before we look at this death scene, let's visit another death scene. The place was Chicago, and the year was 1910. Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Hiller were asleep in bed when they heard a noise. Mr. Hiller got up to investigate and he encountered an armed robber in their home. There was a struggle, and shots were fired. Mr. Hiller was shot twice and died as the robber fled the house.

Later that morning, Chicago police arrested a parolee named Thomas Jennings. He had a gun and injuries from a scuffle. He claimed he had never been near the Hiller home. But there was something that confirmed the fact that he had been there. A few years earlier, Scotland Yard had brought an exhibit to the World's Fair in St. Louis. They demonstrated a new scientific way to identify criminals long after they were gone from the scene of the crime. The new crime solving method was fingerprinting.

The Chicago Police had been studying this science. Unfortunately for the suspect, a railing on the front porch of the Hiller's house had been freshly painted and Jennings left a clear imprint of his fingerprints in the drying paint. Thomas Jennings was the first criminal in law enforcement history to be convicted using fingerprint evidence.

Let's visit the scene of the crucifixion, and determine whose fingerprints we find at the scene. There are several suspects I'd like to introduce to you.

1. Who Killed Jesus? THE JEWS DID: The religious leaders condemned Jesus to die

From the Middle Ages on, Jewish people have suffered because they have been labeled "Christ-killers." This has led to periods of intense anti-Semitism. During the first Christian Crusade in 1096, thousands of Jews in Germany and France were killed, known as the Rhineland massacres.

While Columbus was sailing the ocean blue in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella were expelling all the Jews from Spain as part of the Spanish Inquisition. They were given a simple choice, leave Spain, convert to Catholicism, or die.

And then we all know about the Holocaust. Adolph Hitler had millions of Jews killed, and part of his justification was the belief they were the Christ-killers.

But it's a terrible assumption to believe ALL Jews were responsible for the crucifixion. The Bible says multitudes of the Jews followed Jesus. His twelve disciples were Jewish. Actually, it was a very small group of religious leaders who plotted to kill Jesus. I often call them the Jewish Mafia.

The Bible says, "Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him." (Matthew 26:3-4)

Caiaphas was the Jewish High Priest when Jesus was crucified, but he was really just the puppet of his father-in-law, Annas. Annas was the godfather of the religious mafia. Crime investigators look for three things: Motive, means, and opportunity. The Jewish Mafia had all three. What was their motive? This Jewish Rabbi was threatening their power and their way of life. Jesus had

openly challenged their hypocrisy calling them "a brood of vipers, and whitewashed tombs." He said they were like the blind leading the blind. The Religious Mafia didn't take threats very well. Like most mobs, they considered Jesus a rabble-rouser who had to be silenced.

Did they have means? They could have stoned Jesus; and they had tried that before, but the Jewish crowd was split—some loved Jesus and some hated Him. That was too risky. Their best strategy was to have the Romans execute Jesus; that would be their means. And this was the perfect opportunity! It was the Passover festival, and the Roman governor, Pilate was in town. So based upon this motive, means, and opportunity, some of the leading suspects for killing Jesus had to be the Jewish religious leaders. But were they sole perpetrators? I don't think so. There were other fingerprints at the scene of the cross.

2. Who Killed Jesus? THE ROMANS DID: The soldiers actually crucified Jesus

The Roman soldiers were the executioners of Jesus. They were simply following the orders of their governor, Pilate. Pilate understood that he was being used as a convenient scapegoat for the Jewish leaders. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of any crimes, but in order to pacify the Jewish leaders, he handed him over to the soldiers to be crucified.

The Bible says, "Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him." (John 19:16-18)

Have you ever noticed the Gospel narratives don't go into any detail about the crucifixion? All four Gospel accounts simply say, "They crucified Him." Where are the details? Why don't we have a description of exactly what happened at the crucifixion?

There's a simple answer to that question. In the time in which the New Testament was written, every person had witnessed hundreds of crucifixions, perhaps thousands. Just the word "crucify" would make someone wince. None of us have ever seen a real-life crucifixion. We have no frame of reference. I mentioned in WEBS last week that it would be comparable to me telling you an 18-wheeler crossed the median of I-20 and crashed head on into an SUV where nobody was wearing seat belts. I wouldn't need to describe the gory details; you'd get it.

We don't really get the agony of the crucifixion because the Bible doesn't describe it; it merely states it. We don't get our information about crucifixion from the Bible; we get it from secular historians like Herodotus and Josephus. Three centuries before Jesus' crucifixion we learn that Alexander the Great had 2,000 citizens of Tyre crucified after he conquered the city. They usually just hung them on trees instead of crosses. It was the most brutal kind of execution possible, but it was shameful and the person crucified could linger for days before they died. When the Roman General Titus was besieging Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Josephus wrote that he had 500 or more Jews crucified each day for weeks. He wrote that "there were not enough room for the crosses and not enough crosses for the bodies." (Wars of the Jews 5:1.1).

The Romans also practiced beheading, which was a much quicker and more merciful mode of execution. The Roman historian Seneca wrote this description of crucifixion: "Can anyone be

found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly wounds on shoulders and chest, and drawing out the breath of life amid long drawn-out agony?" (Seneca, Dialogue 3:2.2.).

So, the Jewish leaders are suspects. And the Roman government is the next suspect. But there are some other fingerprints at the scene of the cross. In fact, I want you to see these fingerprints. But don't look at the screen. Instead, look down at your index finger.

3. Who killed Jesus? I DID: My sin was the murder weapon that killed Jesus

The reason Jesus came to planet earth was to die for our sins so we could receive forgiveness. Had there never been any sin, there would have never been a need for the cross.

You might remember the movie a few years ago Mel Gibson produced called "The Passion of the Christ." It was rated R because of the amount of blood and violence. It was really hard to watch. But I think the actual flogging and crucifixion of Jesus was worse than any movie could portray.

In one scene, Jesus is laid down on the cross and His arms are stretched out. Then you see a hand enter the frame holding a long nail and an iron hammer. This hand starts pounding the nail into the flesh of Jesus. That was Mel Gibson's hand. It was his way of saying that we are the ones who sent Jesus to the cross.

You may be thinking, "But Pastor, Mel Gibson has fallen from popularity because of he was accused of domestic abuse. Why are you using him as an illustration? He is one messed-up guy." You're exactly right. He is one messed up guy. And so am I. And so are you. We all are. That's why Jesus had to go to the cross.

Notice the pronouns in this verse, they are plural, but they could be singular as well. "But he was pierced for our [my] transgressions, he was crushed for our [my] iniquities; the punishment that brought us [me] peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are [I am] healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way [I have gone my own way]; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all [all of my iniquity]." (Isaiah 53:5-6)

There's an old spiritual we often sing that asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord. Were you there when they crucified my Lord. Oh, oh... sometimes it causes me to tremble. Tremble. Tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, you were there, and I was there. We were in the heart and the mind of Jesus as He died for our sins.

Rembrandt is perhaps the most famous Dutch artist of all time. He was a deeply committed Christian from the time he was a child. He didn't need to preach the Bible; instead he painted many scenes from the Bible. One of his most famous paintings is called "The Elevation of the Cross." It pictures the moment the soldiers are raising the cross. You can see the hate and anger on the faces of the other men. But Rembrandt painted himself in the picture, identified by his

ubiquitous beret. It was Rembrandt's unforgettable statement that we all had a part in the crucifixion of Jesus. His fingerprints were all over the cross—and so are ours.

The great British pastor and theologian, John Stott wrote: "Before we can begin to see the cross as something done FOR us...we have to see it as something done BY us. Indeed, only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross...may claim his share in its grace." (*The Cross of Christ*)

Who crucified Jesus? You might say that the Jewish leaders and the Roman government crucified Christ. But we also stand guilty. But when you really conduct a thorough cross scene investigation, you discover another surprising suspect.

4. Who killed Jesus? GOD DID: He offered His Son as a sacrifice for sin

Seven hundred years before the cross, the prophet Isaiah described the death of the Messiah as if he was standing in front of the cross. The Jews were looking for a military messiah to deliver them from the Roman rule, but if they had read their own scriptures, they would have seen the Messiah would be a suffering servant.

The Bible says, "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days." (Isaiah 53:10)

You may be scratching your head and asking, "Why? Why would God send His Son to die for us?" The answer is simple: LOVE. You've heard of a crime of passion. The cross was a place of passion. But it wasn't our passion; it was the loving passion of God who loved us enough to send His Son to die for us.

So who killed Jesus? You might say the Jewish leaders did; the Roman government did; I did; and God did. But when it comes to CSI, the Cross Scene Investigation, we've got to simply close the case. Because when it comes down to it, when you ask, "Who Killed Jesus?" It's a moot point, because He isn't dead! He's alive today. You can't have a murder trial if the supposed murder victim is alive! Peter understood this. On the day of Pentecost, he spoke these words to the people of Jerusalem: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him." (Acts 2:23-24)

When I was a young preacher boy in college I heard an evangelist tell a story that had such a great impact of me that I've never forgotten it. You've probably heard it too. It was a story about a man who worked years ago as the manual operator of a railroad drawbridge over a large river. Whenever a ship would pass, he would press levers to activate giant hydraulic gears to raise the center portion of the bridge. Then when the ship passed he would lower the bridge for trains to pass. One day he took his young son with him to work. The operator had raised the bridge and as he was distracted his son wandered over to an opening to look down at the massive gears that moved the bridge.

Suddenly the boy lost his footing and tumbled into the gears. When the father heard his cry and saw him among the gears, he moved to rescue him. But at that moment he heard the whistle of an approaching passenger train. He knew the train would be full of people, and if he didn't lower the drawbridge, the train would crash into the river. There wasn't time to stop the train, so the father had an agonizing decision to make. If he rescued his son, many people would die. But if he lowered the bridge, his son would be crushed in the huge gears.

With a broken heart, and tears filling his eyes, the operator advanced the lever to lower the bridge. It returned to level just moments before the train arrived. The train passed by with passengers laughing and dining, never knowing the sacrifice that had been made for them to live.

When I heard that story as a college student, I thought it was probably the best story to illustrate the crucifixion of Christ I'd ever heard. I've matured since then, and now I realize that this story falls FAR short of the wonder of the cross.

First, of all there's no record of that ever happening, and even if it is told as a parable, it still is a poor illustration. For instance, the drawbridge operator didn't make his decision based on love, he did it reluctantly and hated his decision. God so loved the world—that's you and me—that He gave His only son to die for us. Second, the cross was not a sudden decision God had to make. It wasn't as if the heavenly Father was faced with a dilemma: My son, or the world? No, the Bible says in Revelation 13:8 that Jesus is the Lamb of God that was slain from the foundation of the world! Peter writes He was chosen to be our sacrifice before creation. The cross wasn't an afterthought; it has been in the heart and mind of God from the beginning of the beginning. But finally, the reason God could allow His Son to die on the cross was because He knew all along that death couldn't hold Him.

CONCLUSION

Who killed Jesus? Come on; close the investigation. There was never a body available for an autopsy. As many will be singing in two weeks: "Low in the grave he lay, Jesus, my Savior! Waiting the coming day, Jesus, my Lord! Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph o'er His foes; He arose a victor from the dark domain, and He lives forever with His saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!" (Words by Robert Lowry, 1874)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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