

Who Killed Jesus? Acts 2:23, 36
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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On Sunday we began looking at this passage in Acts 2, and we saw in verse 22 that Jesus is a man attested by God. In His life, through the mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him, there was a clear divine endorsement upon Jesus of Nazareth. God the Father proved, demonstrated, showed forth the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. And we might ask, if this message was so clear, then how is it that Jesus was rejected and crucified? As we'll see, the answer to that question has to do with the hardness of the sinful human heart, but it also has to do with the sovereign plans of God.

This evening as we meditate on the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, I want us to move to the next verse in Peter's sermon, verse 23, and I want us to pose the question, Who killed Jesus? It's not as simple as it may sound, and it doesn't have a simple answer. A sufficient answer to the question, a biblical answer to the question, has multiple levels to it.

God Killed Jesus

The first answer to the question, Who killed Jesus, may sound shocking. The first thing we have to say is that God killed Jesus. Do you see this in verse 23? Peter is going to quickly point the finger at those listening to him and say, you crucified and killed him by the hands of lawless men. But he first wants to make the point that it was all according to God's plan. And Peter needs to make this point because this would have been a huge hurdle for these Jews to get over in order to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In their minds it was unthinkable that the Messiah would die. The Messiah was supposed to triumph over all of God's enemies and conquer the political oppressors. They could not conceive of a Messiah who would be killed, much less a Messiah who would be killed in the humiliating way that Jesus was—dying like a criminal on a cross.

Peter knew that this was a stumbling block to his fellow Jews, and he could identify with their skepticism. He, himself, shared that same skepticism when he first heard Jesus talking about the need for the Son of Man to die.

"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.'" (Matthew 16:21-22, ESV) Peter had not always believed that it was God's

plan for Jesus to die. But now he understood, and he wants his Jewish brothers to understand it, too.

Jesus was delivered up, that is, delivered up to be crucified, according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. This is an emphatic statement. It was not an accident that Jesus died on the cross. It was not a mistake. It did not take God by surprise. It was not the case that there was a different plan, and that planned failed. Christ dying on the cross was THE plan. It was the definite plan. And it happened according to God's foreknowledge. And we have to clarify what this word foreknowledge means, because we might tend to think that this means merely that God knew beforehand that this was going to happen. But the word means more than that. It refers to the fact that He ordained it to happen. When this word is used of God foreknowing His people, it refers to His sovereign choice, His sovereign election. And here, too, it refers to His sovereign plan, ordaining beforehand that Jesus would be crucified.

Isaiah 53 also speaks of the fact that it was God's will to crush His Son. "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief" (verse 10). The Lord is God the Father, and the One put to grief is the Suffering Servant who is being talked about in this passage of Scripture, who is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. So this verse is saying very clearly that God the Father is the One who killed Jesus Christ. He crushed Him. He put Him to grief. And He did so because He and the Son had agreed to do this in order to magnify the grace of God in the salvation of sinners.

This is why we can celebrate the death of Jesus, because it was not a sign of failure, it was not a sign of defeat, it was not the end. It happened exactly according to plan, and through it Jesus accomplished something that is wonderful beyond words. He achieved our eternal salvation.

So the first answer to the question is that God killed Jesus, exactly according to plan. He poured out His wrath against sin upon His own Son.

The Jews of Jesus' Day Killed Jesus

The second answer to question, Who killed Jesus, is the Jewish people of Jesus' day. In the middle of verse 23 Peter accuses his audience directly. To the Jewish crowd gathered there in Jerusalem for Pentecost, he says, you crucified and killed him. And then in verse 36 he says to them again, this Jesus whom you crucified. We've already seen in the Gospel of Mark that there is a growing opposition to Jesus, and that opposition is coming mainly from the Jewish leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. They are hard-hearted and spiritually blind. They are proud and jealous for the attention that Jesus is receiving. And therefore they want to get

Him out of the picture. They want to do away with Him. They want Him dead. And that's just what they did. They got Judas to betray Him, the chief priests and scribes and elders accused Him, the Council condemned Him and delivered Him to Pilate, and the crowd, being stirred up by the chief priests, shouted "Crucify him!"

Lawless Men

Then the third answer to the question is lawless men. The Jews crucified and killed Jesus *by the hands of lawless men*. It was not only Jews who were involved in this, but Gentiles also. The Romans played a key role in the death of Jesus. As the believers pray in Acts 4:27-28, they say, "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

So we see these different groups and different individuals who all played significant roles in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We think of Judas and the Sanhedrin and Pilate and Herod and the crowd and the soldiers, with wickedness in their hearts, they rejected the One who had been clearly attested by God. And they were so passionate in their rejection of Him that they hung Him on a cross.

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Now that we've seen three answers to the question, Who killed Jesus, let's step back for a moment and try to realize the significance of what this verse is saying. God killed Jesus. The Jews of Jesus' day killed Jesus. And lawless men killed Jesus. How can those three answers all be true? Do you feel the impact of this? A verse like this shatters theological boxes and philosophical boxes that we might try to put God in. Can you see the issues that this raises? What we have here are sinful men who committed the most horrific and wicked act imaginable. They killed the perfect, sinless Lamb of God. Jesus deserves no punishment. He deserves all honor and praise and glory. And they spit on Him and whipped Him and nailed Him to a cross like a criminal. And this verse says that God planned that to happen. Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

And if we tried to squeeze this into a particular theological or philosophical box we might be pressured to say one of two things. We might be tempted to minimize God's control over these events. Maybe God didn't really predetermine this. Maybe He only saw it ahead of time. But that doesn't fit with the wording of

this verse—“definite plan and foreknowledge of God”—or the wording of Acts 4:28—“to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” Or we might be tempted to minimize the responsibility of the individuals involved. We might feel the need to say that if God really planned this all out ahead of time, then the people who carried out these plans cannot be held responsible. If God predestined all of this, then these people must just be like robots, lacking free will.

Well, these verses don’t allow us to go in either of those directions. We cannot minimize God’s sovereignty, and we cannot minimize human responsibility. It happened according to God’s plan, and the people who did it are accountable for what they did. Tom Schreiner has said that this verse has been extremely helpful to him in talking about the relationship of predestination and human freedom and responsibility and the fact that predestination does not cancel out human responsibility. Because here people are held guilty for carrying out God’s predestined plan. And Schreiner says that when he speaks with those who disagree with him about predestination, he asks them for an explanation of this verse, and nobody has ever been able to explain it to him. If we really believe the Bible, then we need to believe what this verse is saying. Peter unabashedly upholds absolute divine sovereignty and human responsibility. These people were not coerced into doing this. They acted according to their desires, and are responsible for what they did. And that does not cancel out God’s control over it all.

In John Piper’s little book, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*, the 50th reason he gives is this: Jesus came to die to show that the worst evil is meant by God for good. He quotes Acts 2:23 and Acts 4:27-28, which we’ve looked at. And he writes, “The lash on [Jesus’] back, the thorns on his head, the spit on his cheek, the bruises on his face, the nails in his hands, the spear in his side, the scorn of rulers, the betrayal of his friend, the desertion by his disciples—these were all the result of sin, and all designed by God to destroy the power of sin. . . . There is no greater sin than to hate and kill the Son of God. There was no greater suffering nor any greater innocence than the suffering and innocence of Christ. Yet God was in it all.”

Let this truth sink into your hearts, brothers and sisters. The worst evil in the history of the universe was planned and predestined by God, and it was good of Him to plan it. It was so good of Him to ordain these evil actions, because it was through these actions that Jesus achieved our salvation. So we marvel at God’s sovereignty, which we cannot fully understand, and we praise Him for His glorious plan of redemption. And to think about how this applies to our lives in a myriad of ways, we just need to realize that if this is the case with the worst evil in the

world, it is indeed also true of all the lesser evils in the world. God is in control, not only of the evil that led to Christ's death, but He is also in control of the evils that occur every day in our own lives. He is in control of the evils that lead to the death of loved ones. He is in control of the evils that lead to the loss of a job. He is in control of the sins that others commit against us, whether it's a spouse, a relative, another church member, a teacher, a co-worker.

And if we truly believe that, it will give us great hope and free us from so many miseries. Think about it. The fact that God is in control does not absolve anybody of the guilt they bear for their sinful actions. But the fact that God is in control should cause us to look beyond those sins to the God who has ordained them for the good of His people. If we just focus on the sins that others have committed against us we will be bitter and angry and miserable people. But if we look to the sovereign and good plan of God, we will be hopeful and happy people. Every evil, every trial, every sin done against us, is part of God's good plan for us. He is doing good to us, even when others are seeking to do us harm.

You and I Killed Jesus

I want to close with one more answer to the question, Who killed Jesus. We've seen in Acts 2:23 that God killed Jesus, the Jews of Jesus' day killed Jesus, lawless men killed Jesus. But we would miss the effect of Peter's sermon if we did not also put ourselves in the position of those hearing this sermon and realize that the statement, you crucified and killed him, is directed at us as well. We must face the reality that we, too, killed Jesus. We all played a role in putting Him on the cross.

Surely as Peter spoke these words, some in that vast crowd may have thought to themselves, I didn't have anything to do with crucifying Jesus. I wasn't even here. And maybe that's what we would say to ourselves now. I wasn't even there. How could you say that I killed Jesus?

As we saw last Sunday, Jesus is a man attested by God. Therefore the appropriate response to Jesus would have been to receive Him joyfully and worship and honor Him. But instead sinful humanity rejected Him and put Him on a cross. And whether we were there or not, we have all shared in that rejection of the Messiah and therefore bear the guilt for His death. By our very nature, and in our hearts and in our actions, we have ridiculed and scorned the Son of God. We cannot look down our noses at Judas or Pilate or Herod or the religious leaders or the Roman soldiers, because we have done the same thing in our own lives. And we are guilty just like they are.

The remarkable thing is that Jesus died to save His enemies. It was our sin that put Him on the cross, and it was the

infinite penalty for sin that He bore on the cross. We all, in our sin, rejected Him and crucified Him, and then in His death He was punished for those sins in our place. And so for those who repent and believe, for those who turn from rejecting Jesus to embracing Him, there is no more guilt. Jesus took our guilt. He suffered for our sin. He died in our place. And on Sunday morning we'll celebrate that He didn't stay dead. As verse 24 says, "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."