**Murder or Manslaughter?**

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

An unhappily married woman was tired of being broke all the time because her husband was too lazy to get a job. So she decided to hire a hitman named Artie to kill her husband. But when Artie told her his normal fee was $10,000, she told him she wouldn’t have that kind of money until she collected her husband’s life insurance. All she had was a dollar, which Artie reluctantly accepted as a down payment.

He then followed her husband to Walmart, and strangledhim in the men’s room. But just then, a man entered the men’s room and saw him. Knowing he couldn’t leave any witnesses behind, he strangled him too. But as he was leaving the men’s room, he was caught by a security guard. And the next day, the headline in the newspaper read, “Artie chokes two for a dollar at Walmart.”

Here in our text in Acts 3, the Apostle Peter has just finished charging the people of Israel with the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, a death that could easily be considered *murder in the first degree.* So the Jews who heard him level that indictment against them that day were probably feeling lower than a bow-legged caterpillar. But you can imagine how much *better* they felt when Peter finished his indictment by reducing the charge against them from murder to *manslaughter,* as we see when Peter declared,

**“And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:17).**

Now to begin with, that word *wot* isn’t one we use any more. But it just means *to know something,* as we see when we read,

**“And Abimelech said, *I wot not who hath done this thing…”* (Genesis 21:26).**

When Abimelech said that he “wot not” who did it, that meant he didn’t *know* who did it. So when Peter said that he wot that the Jews killed the Lord “through ignorance,” he was saying that he *knew* that they did it through ignorance. He was saying, as it were, “You did it, but you didn’t know what you were doing when you did it.”

Now if you’re wondering where he got an idea like that, he got it from the Lord, who declared with some of His last breaths,

**“Father, forgive them; *for they know not what they do…”* (Luke 23:34).**

According to the Lord Himself, they didn’t know what they were doing when they killed Him. That is, they didn’t know that the One they were killing *God in the flesh.*

Now they *could* have known it. I mean, He fit the description given by the Old Testament prophets of their Messiah to a T. So they could have known it, and they *should* have known it. But the fact is, they *didn’t* know it, and that meant they were guilty of *manslaughter* instead of *murder.*

Now if you’re not sure what the difference is, what do you say we let Moses explain it. In describing a case of manslaughter, he wrote,

**“…this is the case of *the slayer*...Whoso killeth his neighbour *ignorantly*… As when a man goeth…to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, *and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbour, that he die...”* (Deuteronomy 19:4-6).**

Do you see the difference between that and cold-blooded murder? I mean, if you take an ax and *deliberately* bury it in a man’s back, they have a name for you. They call you an ax-murderer.

Every week I stay a few nights at the Super 8 in Germantown, Wisconsin, so that I can spend three days in the office at *Berean Bible Society.* Like most motels, you have to have a key card to enter the building. But sometimes when I’m entering, I’ll hold the door for the man behind me. Now I’m just trying to be polite, but if you think it through, I’m really taking a chance. I don’t know if that man has a key or not! So I’ll usually joke and say, “You’re not an ax-muderer, are you? I’m not letting a killer into the building, am I?”

Well, in ancient Israel, if you murdered a man with an ax, or in any other manner, you had to die, as Moses said when he wrote, “the murderer shall surely be put to death” (Num. 35:16). That’s a law that has never been repealed, a law based on God’s instructions to Noah in Genesis 9:6:

**“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.”**

These instructions were given to Noah as part of God’s instructions for all mankind. Noah represented all mankind when he stepped off the ark and heard God establish that precept.

But if you killed a man *ignorantly* in Ancient Israel, he could flee to one of the cities of refuge that God instructed Moses to establish in the Promised Land when they arrived there after their forty year sojourn in the wilderness:

**“…the Lord spake unto Moses, saying…When ye be come over Jordan into the land of Canaan; Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, *which killeth any person at unawares…*the manslayer*…”* (Numbers 35:10-30).**

And what Peter is doing here in our text in Acts 3:17 is taking advantage of this generous provision in the law of Moses and reducing the charge against *the people of Israel* from murder to manslaughter, for they didn’t know that the One they were killing was their Messiah.

Now the question is, how could they not have known it if the Old Testament prophets described their messiah so thoroughly? And the answer to that question is that they didn’t know they were crucifying their messiah *because they didn’t know their Bibles.* Even some of the ones who thought that He *was* their messiah weren’t as sure about it as they could have been, as we see when we read,

**“Then said some of them…*Do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ?* Howbeit we know this man whence he is: *but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence He is”* (John 7:25-27).**

As you can see, these Jews thought that the Lord was their Christ, their Messsiah. But they weren’t *sure* because they *also* thought that when Messiah actually appeared that no one would be able to tell “whence He is,” i.e., where He came from, what city He’d be born in. And it was commonly known that the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So as I say, they couldn’t be as sure that Jesus was their Christ as they might have been, for they seemed to be unaware that the prophet Micah had predicted,

**“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).**

If they had been familiar with that prophecy, those Jews could have been more sure that Jesus was their Christ. And you know what? The more you know *your* Bible, the more sure *you* can be about spiritual things as well.

But when they asked if *their rulers* knew that the Lord Jesus was their Christ, the answer to that question was *no,* and here’s why:

**“…the Pharisees…said…Search, and look: *for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet”* (John 7:47-52).**

Now their implication, of course, was that Jesus couldn’t have been their Messiah for *He* came out of Galilee! But this shows that their rulers didn’t know their Bibles either, for *Jonah* was a prophet from Galilee.

Jonah was “the son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1), and “Amittai…was of Gathhepher” (II Ki. 14:25). And Gathhepher was also spelled “Gittahhepher” (Josh.19:13), a city that was part of “the inheritance of the children of Zebulun” (v. 16). And Matthew 4:15 tells us that “Zabulon” is part of “Galilee of the Gentiles.” Add it all up and you know that Jonah was a Galilean. So a prophet *did* rise out of Galilee!

Now you probably enjoyed studying that out, for you wouldn’t be reading this article if you didn’t find Bible study to be interesting. But if you were to try to preach that in most churches, you’d find yourself in the middle of a snooze fest! Most people don’t want to study their Bibles that deeply, not even most Christians!

But *the rulers in Israel* should have been willing to study the Bible that deeply, if they were going to go around saying things like Jesus couldn’t be their Christ because no prophet could come out of Galilee.

But they weren’t.

And that’s why Paul had to write,

**“they that dwell at Jerusalem, *and their rulers,* because they knew Him not, *nor…the prophets which are read every sabbath day*, they have fulfilled them in condemning Him” (Acts 13:27).**

Can you see how important it is for you to know your Bible? I mean, you’re not going to make the worst mistake in all of human history if you *don’t* study the Word, as those rulers did. But you might make the biggest mistake *of your own personal life* if you are unfamiliar with what the Bible teaches in all areas of life. Do you think maybe it’s worth learning the Bible well to avoid that, and all the lesser mistakes of life that knowing the Word can help you evade?

Now, fortunately for Israel’s rulers, the Law of Moses also made a provision for *rulers* who sinned through ignorance:

**“When *a ruler* hath sinned, and done somewhat *through ignorance…”* (Leviticus 4:22).**

Moses went on to explain that a ruler could offer a sacrifice to pay for his sin of ignorance.

But now here I must pause to address something. Perhaps while reading these words, you’ve been thinking that Peter was stretching things a bit to apply the manslaughter provision *to the whole nation of Israel.* If so, it will interest you to learn that there was even a provision for that in the law:

**“…*if the whole congregation of Israel* sin through ignorance…” (Leviticus 4:13).**

If the whole congregation sinned a sin through ignorance, the high priest could offer a sacrifice on its behalf.

Now why do you think God put provisions like that in the law? Well, do you think God really didn’t know that the people of Israel would one day kill the Lord through ignorance, and they would need the benefit that this provision allowed them?

This prompts another question. Do you also think He didn’t see every problem that you’ll ever have in your life coming, and make a provision for it in His Word that will help get you through it? Do you think it is worth studying the Word to learn those provisions?

Now here I’d like you to take a closer look at Paul’s words in Acts 13:27. In speaking of the Jews in Jerusalem and their rulers, he wrote that “they” fulfilled the prophets who predicted that Christ “ought…to have suffered these things” (Luke 24:25). Compare that to what Peter said as we read on in our text:

“**But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, HE hath so fulfilled” (Acts 3:18).**

Did you catch the difference? Peter said that *God* fulfilled all the prophets when the Lord suffered on the cross, while Paul said that *the Jews* fulfilled the prophets when He suffered. Why would that be?

Well, in reducing Israel’s charge from murder to manslaughter, Peter shifted the responsibility of the Lord’s death from the Jews *to Himself.* But when the people of Israel stood by their awful deed when they stoned the Lord’s prophet in Acts 7, Paul shifted responsibility for the Lord’s death *back* to the nation for rejecting God’s gracious offer to reduce their charge to manslaughter.

Now if that sounds familiar, it’s because it’s a lot like what happened at the cross. Speaking of the cross, Paul wrote

**“that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (II Corinthians 5:19).**

But if God wasn’t imputing the sins of the people of the world *to them* at the cross, then to whom was He imputing them? *To the Lord,* of course! He shifted the responsibility of our sins from us *to Him.* But we know that if men *reject* His gracious offer, He will shift responsibility for their sins *back* to them. Otherwise it would make no sense for Paul to say,

**“Blessed is the man *to whom the Lord will not impute sin”* (Romans 4:8).**

That means God *will* impute sin to unsaved men who don’t accept His gracious provision of imputing their sins to Christ. And *that* means if you’re not saved, you’d better believe God when He says that He imputed your sins to Christ, and that He paid for them completely with His death on the cross, without any help from you. Because if you don’t, someday God will impute your sins *back* to you, and *you’ll* have to pay for them with an eternity in the lake of fire.

But here in Acts 3, God’s gracious offer to the nation of Israel, that of accepting the blame for Christ’s suffering, was still on the table. So He has a proposition for the people of Israel, one that Peter goes on to describe in the next verse of our text:

**“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19).**

Now the word “ye” here is a *plural* pronoun. The words “thee” and “thou” are *singular,* and the *King James Version* of the Bible is the only Bible version that retains the use of these valuable pronouns. If you don’t stick with the KJV, you lose a valuable study tool. And here in Acts 3:19, you will fail to see that Peter is addressing *the entire nation of Israel.*

You see, he’s not telling individual Jews to get saved here. He did that back in Acts 2:38, when he told individuals to repent and be baptized if they wanted to receive remission of their sins. Here he’s speaking to the people he’s been talking about in the context, *all the ones who sinned through ignorance,* the people and their rulers and the whole congregation in Israel.

You see, the entire *nation* had to get saved in order for God’s prophetic program to continue. What do we grace believers always say about the Great Commission that the Lord gave to the twelve apostles when He told them to

**“be witnesses…in Jerusalem…Judaea...Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).**

Grace believers know that in giving the 12 these instructions, the Lord wasn’t giving them the option of preaching in Jerusalem and Judaea, and then if the Jews there didn’t get saved, they could just move on to greener pastures among the Gentiles. They remembered that the Lord had told them,

**“Let the children first be *filled:* for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it unto the dogs” (Mark 7:27).**

From those words they would have understood that the Lord wasn’t just thinking of the bread of physical healing. They understood that He meant that before the bread of *salvation* could go to the dogs among the Gentiles, the children of Israel had to first be *filled* with salvation. This was because God planned to *use* the nation of Israel as His representatives to *reach* the Gentiles, and God insists that His representatives be saved. He’s funny that way!

As further proof that the entire nation of Israel must get saved, look what Paul told them at the end of the Book of Acts after everyone in the nation *didn’t* get saved:

**“*And some believed the things which were spoken,* and some believed not. *And when they agreed not among themselves,* they departed, after…Paul had spoken…Well spake… Esaias…Saying…the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing…” (Acts 28:24-27).**

Do you see how it wasn’t enough that *some* of them believed in Israel? When they *all* didn’t believe, Paul lumped them all together and reminded them that Isaiah *predicted* that the nation wouldn’t believe. He then went on to tell them what God was doing about their failure to believe:

**“…their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears…and should be converted*…*Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that *they* will hear it” (Acts 28:27,28).**

When they didn’t believe, God started something new with the Gentiles, the Body of Christ and the dispensation of grace!

But do you see that word “converted” there? Isn’t that what Peter’s asking the nation to do in Acts 3:19, “be converted”? Now in the Bible, individuals can be converted, but Peter’s talking about the conversion of the nation. And you know that because when the nation *didn’t* convert, God put their program on hold, and started a whole new program with Paul, sending His salvation to the Gentiles, and making *them* His representatives. *That’s* what He was doing about their failure to believe as a nation!

But back here in Acts 3:19, God is still trying to get the nation of Israel to convert. And to do that, He gives them some pretty powerful incentive. He promised that if they would convert, He would blot out their sins!

Now remember, we’ve already established that this isn’t talking about individual Jews getting saved. Individual Jews got saved when they did what Peter told them to do in Acts 2:38. They got saved when they repented and were baptized for the remission of sins, as Peter instructed. No, this is talking about the blotting out of the sins of the *nation.*

Do you know what that word *blot* means? Did you ever hear of an *ink blot test,* also known as a Rorschach test? The person being tested is shown various ink blots and asked what he sees in the blot. This is said to provide some sort of psychological analysis of the person being tested. Well, back in Bible days, they didn’t have lead pencils with erasers. All they had was *ink.* And if you made a mistake, you couldn’t erase it, you had to *blot it out.* You had to *cover* your mistake with *more* ink.

Well, spiritually speaking, Adam made a *big* mistake when he sinned, and all of us have made our share of mistakes since that time. And we need to have God *blot out* our sins. We know this to be so because of what Nehemiah prayed when he was rebuilding the temple, and God’s enemies were opposing him. That man of God prayed,

**“…*cover not their iniquity*, and *let not their sin be blotted out* *from before Thee”* (Nehemiah 4:5).**

Do you see how the blotting out of men’s sins is called the *covering* of their sins? That’s what individuals get when they get saved, as Paul says in Romans 4:7,8:

**“Blessed are they whose iniquities are *forgiven,* and whose sins are *covered”* (Romans 4:7,8).**

When you got saved, God blotted out your sins. He covered them with the blood of Christ.

But God dealt with the people of Israel as a nation. They were a “commonwealth” (Eph. 2:12). And *the nation* needed to have *their* sins blotted out. But the nation won’t *get* their sins blotted out until—as Peter says here in Acts 3:19—“the times of refreshing” come. He was talking about the kingdom of heaven on earth, of course. *That’s* when the nation will get her sins blotted out.

Now we see *types* of this in the Old Testament. Every time the nation fell out of favor with God, and needed God to forgive them, *He did,* as we learn when Moses prayed,

**“Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity *of this people* according unto the greatness of Thy mercy, *and as Thou hast forgiven this people,* from Egypt even until now” (Numbers 14:19).**

Every time the nation of Israel fell out of favor with God, they needed to be forgiven as a people—*especially* when they sinned so badly that God allowed them to be taken captive by their enemies. Do you know what they were supposed to do when that happened? Solomon prayed,

**“If they sin against Thee…and Thou…deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy…Yet if they shall…*repent*…Then hear Thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling place, and…forgive Thy people…” (I Kings 8:46-50).**

When they sinned so badly that God let them be taken captive, they were supposed to “repent.” You know. Like Peter was telling them to do here in our text, here where they are in captivity to Rome.

Now we know that they *didn’t* repent, and we saw how God then turned to the Gentiles. But after the Rapture brings an end to the present dispensation of grace, the nation of Israel will *again* find herself in captivity, this time to the antichrist. But as Peter says here, if they’ll just repent, God will hear in His dwelling place—in the presence of the Lord—and send the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

We see a type of all that when God allowed Israel to be taken captive by Babylon. Do you know what the Psalmist said when God released them from that captivity? He prayed,

**“Lord, Thou hast been favourable unto Thy land: Thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob. Thou hast *forgiven the iniquity of thy people*, thou hast *covered all their sin”* (Psalm 85:1,2).**

And God is going to do that for the nation *again* when He brings an end to their captivity to the beast and introduces the times of refreshing in the kingdom.

But before the kingdom can come, something else has to come first, something we see typified in Israel’s seven feasts. Peter was delivering this message on the Day of Pentecost, but do you know which feast in Israel *followed* the Day of Pentecost? It was *the Day of Atonement* (Lev. 23:15-25).

Now the Day of Atonement didn’t symbolize Christ’s death for their sins. The Passover symbolized that. The Day of Atonement stood for the day when the nation would get *the benefit* of the Lord’s atonement. *Individuals* get that when they get saved, as we see when Paul wrote,

**“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ…by whom we have *now* received the atonement” (Romans 5:1,11).**

As you can see, individuals get the benefit of Christ’s atonement when they believe. But the nation of Israel won’t get *their* atonement *as a nation* until *the nation* believes. When will that happen? At the Second Coming of Christ! How do we know that? We know that because Paul wrote,

**“*all Israel* shall be saved…There shall come...the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is My covenant unto them, when I shall take away *their* sins” (Romans 11:26,27).**

Now that’s not talking about the *first* coming of Christ. He’d already come when Paul used the future tense there to say “there *shall* come” the Deliverer. That’s talking about the Second Coming. *That’s* when the nation will believe, on the *ultimate* Day of Atonement. All the celebrations of that feast in the past were all mere symbols of that coming day, just as all of the Passovers in the past were just symbols of how “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us” (I Cor. 5:7).

Bit now before we leave Acts 3:19, there’s one more thing we need to point out. And that is how wrong it is when Christians quote II Chronicles 7:14 and apply it to *our own* nation. In that well-known verse, God declared,

**“If My people…shall humble themselves…and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, *and will forgive their sin*, and will heal their land” (II Chronicles 7:14).**

How many times have you heard preachers quote that verse and apply it to the United States? But the people of the United States are not God’s people! And no matter how much we turn from our wicked ways, He is not going to forgive our sins *as a nation* and *as a people.* God isn’t dealing with nations in the dispensation of grace, He’s dealing with individuals! And He’s never going to heal our land like He will heal the land of Israel before establishing the kingdom in her land.

But when the kingdom finally does come, do you have any idea how “refreshing” it will be? The desert will blossom as the rose, wolf and the lamb will lie together, the blind will see, the lame will walk, and

**“In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, *Holiness Unto The Lord”* (Zechariah 14:20).**

Instead of looking at obscene graffiti everywhere you look, like we have to do today, they’ll be looking at things like that! And I don’t know about you, but I’d find that a refreshing change from what I see when I’m out and about. And it will all start with what we read about in Acts 3:20,21:

**“And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:**

**“Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”**

Here Peter is not talking about the Rapture, he’s talking about sending Jesus back to establish Israel’s kingdom. You may remember that back in Acts 1, the disciples asked the Lord a question:

**“…Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom...*It is not for you to know…”* (Acts 1:6,7).**

Did you ever wonder why He answered them like that? Wasn’t He the One who began His ministry by declaring, “Repent, *for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* So the answer to their question was *yes,* it *was* time for the kingdom! So how come the Lord didn’t tell them that? It was because He knew that the times of refreshing could only come from the Lord’s presence *if* the entire nation repented and was converted.

This was the first *offer* of the kingdom, by the way. God didn’t offer the kingdom to the people of Israel during the Lord’s earthly ministry recorded in the four gospels. He *talked* about the kingdom quite a bit in those books, but He couldn’t *offer* it to them, for the kingdom couldn’t come until He died and paid for their sins. *Christ* was preached to them, as Peter says here in Acts 3:20, but the kingdom wasn’t offered to them.

But do you remember what happened after the Lord *did* die and rise again? Speaking of His apostles, we read that

**“after the Lord had spoken unto them, *He was received up into heaven,* and sat on the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19).**

Notice it says that heaven “received” the Lord. God the Father said to His Son, as it were, “They don’t want you down there? Come sit at My right hand!” And that’s where He’ll sit until God sends Him back to defeat the Antichrist and establish the kingdom. As Peter put said of the Lord, “whom the heaven *must receive* until the times of restitution of all things.”

But Peter’s message here is *not* the message we preach! We don’t preach, “Repent and God will send Jesus *down here.”* We say, “Believe and God will take you *up there* in the Rapture!” We don’t pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we pray, “Thy church *go!”* In the meantime, God won’t send Jesus Christ back to Israel until it is time for the kingdom, “the restitution of all things” (Acts 3:20).

Now here we have another name for the kingdom. That word “restitution” means to *replace* or *restore* that which has been lost or taken away, as we see when Moses wrote,

**“If fire break out…so that the stacks of corn…be consumed therewith; *he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution”* (Exodus 22:6).**

If you burned your neighbor’s cornfield to the ground in those days, they didn’t put you in jail, where your neighbor’s taxes would support *you* for a few years. They made *you* pay *him* back, which makes a whole lot more sense, if you think about it. That’s called making restitution.

But what are the *times* of restitution? Well, when Adam sinned, he lost his right to live in Paradise here on earth. But someday God is going to *restore* man’s right to live in Paradise here on earth in the kingdom!

And you’ll notice that Peter says that this was something that was “spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” It’s what all the prophets talked about!

I have a vivid memory from forty years ago, when a man criticized a grace pastor saying, “He thinks everything in the Old Testament is about either the Tribulation, the Second Coming of Christ, or the kingdom.” Well, you know what? He’s not the only one who thinks that! We know that *the Apostle Peter* thought that as well, for that’s what he declares here!

We call this the prophetic program. It concerned God’s plan to restore paradise on earth for the people of Israel. But that’s *different* from His *mystery* program, which concerns His plan to take the Body of Christ to paradise in heaven! Speaking of this play, Paul called it,

**“…the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, *which was kept secret since the world began”* (Romans 16:25).**

Is something that was kept secret since the world began *different* than something that was spoken by the prophets since the world began? Of course! Both Peter and Paul preached Christ, but Paul preached Christ “according to the revelation of the mystery.” And that’s not a message you’ll find in these early chapters of the Book of Acts!