

## John 10:33

### Who does he think he is?

In John 10 we read that the Jews hated Jesus so much they wanted to take the law into their own hands and execute him by stoning. There is an Islamic tradition of execution by stoning that is very similar to that practised by the ancient Jewish people. Modern day executions by stoning were carried out by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite the heat, on the day of execution by stoning, people came by the thousands, men, women and children, to enjoy the sight of the Taliban stoning people to death. I lived in Pakistan for 7 years and one day we had a public execution by hanging in the local cricket stadium. The day of execution was declared a public holiday. The whole town had a festival atmosphere. Language teachers asked permission to go and see the show.

If a married Muslim has sex with someone other than his/her partner, then, according to Islamic shariah law, *rajam*, stoning to death is the penalty. The Prophet Muhammad had a number of men and women executed by stoning (Sahih Muslim Chapters 623, 680, 682 and Hadith Malik (493:1520). According to shariah law, the man is to be buried up to his waist and the woman to above her breasts. The stones must not be too small or death may not ensue. Nor must the stones be too big or death may come too quickly. A pregnant woman should not be executed until after the birth of the child.

The Jews portrayed in our passage would enjoy nothing better than to smash Jesus' head in with stones. They didn't get him this time. We are told that he escaped. But they didn't have to wait too much longer before they were able to arrange to have nails hammered into Jesus' hands and feet and left to die in agony on a cross. Jewish laws recorded in the Mishnah stipulated that people could be executed either by stoning, burning, decapitation, or strangulation. When the crime was blasphemy the corpse was then hung on a pole for display, apparently like a slab of meat. The Jews wanted to stone Christ for blasphemy. On this occasion the Jews who hated Jesus failed to carry out their evil purpose, but they eventually succeeded in getting their way and indeed Jesus was hung on a cross for display, like a slab or meat.

But why did they hate Jesus so much? Let me read some short statements for you from our passage:

Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' 'We are not stoning you for any of these,' replied the Jews, 'but for blasphemy, because you a mere man, claim to be God.'

Westerners were held by the Taliban who faced charges of committing blasphemy. As far as the Taliban was concerned to preach Christianity is to commit blasphemy. Those Westerners face the death penalty. Woe betide you if violent religious fundamentalists think you have committed blasphemy!

Violent fundamentalist Jews said Jesus had committed blasphemy. They said he had claimed to be God. Was Jesus an innocent victim? Were these fundamentalist Jews putting words in Jesus' mouth that Jesus himself never made or never would make? We say don't we, "There's no smoke without fire." Obviously, Jesus must have said something to upset them so much. What was it that whipped them up into such a murderous mood?

It all begins with these aggressive, hostile Jews being frustrated with Jesus. John tells us that when they first surrounded Jesus that they demanded, "*If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*" You need to know a little bit about Jewish religion to understand what they were on about. Even today the Jewish people are still waiting for God to send them a great leader promised to them

in their Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. This is the most important difference between Jews and Christians. The Jews are still waiting for this great leader from God whom they call the *Messiah*. We Christians insist that God has already sent them and us this great leader, namely Jesus. In fact the word Christ is just Greek for Messiah.

We all get frustrated with people who beat about the bush and won't answer questions directly. Don't you get tired of seeing politicians being questioned on TV? The interviewer asks the politician a question and the politician seldom answers the question. Instead the politician tries to use the question to get his own message across and score points. Sometimes we get really exasperated with people who won't speak plainly. Now Jesus had in fact made it very clear to his own followers that he was the Messiah, the great leader from God. But here we have Jews asking Jesus a straight question, "Are you the Messiah or not? Give us a plain answer." Does Jesus give a straight answer? No, he does not. What Jesus says is, "*I did tell you, but you do not believe*" (v25). Or to put it in modern speak - "I've already answered your question. You didn't accept my answer before so it's a waste of time giving you a straight answer now."

What's going on here? Is Jesus being like an evasive, slimy politician? Is he like that bar of wet slippery soap you try to hang on to when you're having a shower? No! Remember these Jews are violent fundamentalists. John has been telling us about their hostility towards Jesus over and over again since early in this book. They are itching for an excuse to get rid of Jesus.

Imagine you are married and I say to you, "Now I want you to give me a straight answer to this question - just yes or no: 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' If you answer, "No" you are condemned as an active wife-beater. If you answer "Yes" then it implies you once were a wife-beater but you now claim you have stopped. Whichever way you answer your reputation is damaged and your credibility is called into question. In TV legal dramas lawyers are always putting questions like this to squirming people in the witness box.

The question the Jews ask Jesus is just like this: "*If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.*" The crowds were flocking to be near Jesus and to hear him because they hoped he was indeed the Messiah. So if Jesus says, "No, I am not the Messiah" then his entire ministry is in tatters. But if he says, "Yes, I am the Messiah" then he's in big trouble from all the violent fundamentalists who were unshakably convinced in their own minds that the Messiah would be a great political leader who would lead them to a miraculous military victory against overwhelming odds, against the might of the Roman Empire, just as today extremist militant Muslims hope for a leader who will lead them into victory against the might of America and its Western allies.

Jesus does not give a straight answer to this loaded question not because he is an evasive politician but because it would be foolish to do so. When the hostile Jewish fundamentalists ask Jesus this question they think they have put him in the frying pan. When Jesus opens his mouth and gives an answer it seems as though Jesus jumps out of the frying pan into the fire. Jesus is not prepared to play their game but he is not a self-protective politician. He deliberately ups the ante. He consciously and deliberately says things that upset the Jews even more than if he had simply said, "Yes, I am the Messiah."

There were three women waiting to be executed: Brilliant Beryl, Smart Susan and Dumb Deborah. It was an old-fashioned execution. Of course, these women didn't want to die, so they needed a plan. The redhead said, "I have an idea. Follow my lead." So, when it was time for Brilliant Beryl's execution, the man put on her blindfold and made her line up against a wall. "Do you have any last words?" he asked. "No." Brilliant Beryl replied. "Okay then. We're set. Ready. Aim..." "TORNADO!" Brilliant Beryl yelled out, pointing. The gunmen all turned around, and she escaped!

Smart Susan and Dumb Deborah saw this. It came the time for Smart Susan's execution. A man put on her blindfold and made her line up against a wall. "Do you have any last words?" he asked. "No." Smart Susan replied. "Okay then. We're set. Ready. Aim... "

"FLOOD!" Smart Susan yelled out, pointing. The gunmen all turned around, and she escaped, too!

Now came the time for Dumb Deborah's execution, the man put on her blindfold and made her line up against a wall. "Do you have any last words?" he asked. "No." Dumb Deborah replied. "Okay then. We're set. Ready. Aim... "

"FIRE!" ...

Look at Jesus' answer. In some ways it's rather like Dumb Deborah's word. Here you have murderous Jews with Jesus in the crosshairs. But Jesus does not give them an answer that distracts them and enables him to escape. It's almost as though the Jews are saying "Ready. Aim" and Jesus blurts out, "Fire." You see, Jesus ends up by saying to them words that make them itch to pull the trigger. Astoundingly, he claims, "*I and the Father are one.*" You must understand that no individual Jew of Jesus' day would ever have dared to speak of God as his father in public as Jesus did. But Jesus went even further than this. Not only did Jesus call himself the Son of God but he adds, "*I and the Father are one.*" Jesus plainly tells the Jews, "What is true of God my Father is true also of me and vice versa. When it comes to power and authority there is no difference between myself and God the Father."

Now there was no mistaking Jesus' meaning and his enemies seized on it immediately. They cry out in their rage: "*We are not stoning you for any of your miracles but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.*" Jesus was condemned to death for blasphemy by the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin. Later, when the Jews brought Jesus to Pilate demanding his crucifixion, Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." They insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:6-7).

Make no mistake about it. It is because Jesus is God that he says, "I and the Father are one." It is because Jesus is God that he says, "I give people eternal life and they shall never perish." If you don't know Jesus you don't have this life. When you die your body, like mine, will rot in the ground. But you yourself, not your body will perish, like food that's rotting and going off. And this process of perishing will last for ever. Because Jesus is God he offers you real life and because he is God he keeps his promises. So if you give your life to Jesus then he will give you a life which can never be taken away from you. You will never perish. When those 3000 people killed in the World Trade Centre went to their places of business first thing on the morning of September 11, 2001 the ground seemed firm beneath their feet. But in a moment of horror their fragile lives were snatched away from them. You must understand that there is only one place of ultimate security - to be in the hand of God, that is, to be in the hand of Jesus. Do you want to have a life which is perfectly secure for ever? Jesus says to those to whom he gives eternal life: "*no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*" Is your life in the hand of God, in the hand of Jesus?

Jesus calls his followers his sheep. That's because Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus said earlier in this same chapter, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.*" The murderous fundamentalist Jews tried to stone Jesus and failed. Later they gloated over the way in which they forced the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to crucify Jesus. It is because Jesus is God that he was completely in control of his own life. He decided when it was time to die. In the man Jesus we see that God is a wonderful God. Jesus loves you so much that he deliberately allowed the fundamentalist Jews to organise his death. You see Jesus laid down his life so that you might have the eternal life he offers. But it is only the sheep that receive this life. Jesus says, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them*

*eternal life and they shall never perish.*" Can you all hear that sound? Listen! It is the voice of God calling out to you. It is the voice of Jesus calling out to you. Do you hear the voice of Jesus ringing in your ears, "Follow me!", he says. "Give your life to me," he says. "Put your entire life in my hand," he says.

Some of you have never had a personal relationship with Jesus, the man who is God. Today I urge you to acknowledge your guilt in shutting God out of your life. I urge you to put your entire life in the hands of Jesus and ask him to take control of it and lead you as he will. I am going to pray the following prayer now. If you have never had a personal relationship with Jesus then I call upon you to pray this prayer right now:

"Dear God,  
I admit I have tried to ignore you and resisted your right to be in charge. I no longer want to live that way.  
I believe Jesus is the Son of God, that because he died for me you will forgive me for the life I've lived.  
I make a commitment that from this day forward I will follow Jesus. I will find out how he wants me to live my life and, relying on your help, I commit myself to live my life the way Jesus wants me to.  
Amen."