

Prophecy 102 (Who Gets Stoned)

John 8:2-7; Isaiah 66:23-24, Zephaniah 3:8-9; Daniel 2:31-35

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Peter Hiatt

Video and audio versions available online:

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Transcript document prepared by: Heather Eades (eades.heather@gmail.com)

This document was prepared by Heather Eades using Peter's notes and the video version of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Heather know. Thank you!

[Opening song: "Everybody Must Get Stoned" by Bob Dylan]

Prayer

So, Father, I pray that you would help us understand who must get stoned, and why that is that we all feel so alone. In Jesus's name, I pray that you would help us to preach, Father, by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Message

John 8:2 · Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple.

[The Temple was a huge building made of stones where Israel, the Lord's Bride, was to commune with the Lord—her husband]

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ This they said to test himⁱ...

[You're all familiar with this story... but you may not realize just what a challenging test this was for Jesus. Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but in fact to fulfill them, for our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.ⁱⁱ]

So, the Scribes and Pharisees throw this woman at Jesus feet and say:

⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."

[Video clip: YouTube clip from *Robot Chicken*
Comedy Central, cir. 2008]

Scene opens with a man tied to a tree surrounding by an angry mob getting ready to hurl rocks at him. Puppet character depicting Jesus enters the scene.

Puppet Jesus Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

Other puppet Scribes and Pharisees all drop their stones.

Once the stones are dropped, Jesus punches out the man tied to tree himself, yelling “Blam-mo!”

Now in that little video, they depict a man tied to a tree, for I suppose that even the folks at Comedy Central have their limits. And they figure Jesus stoning a woman would just be “over the line.”

And yet, maybe that’s what should’ve happened... right? I mean, Jesus was without sin, and he did come to fulfill the law and the prophets—and the law does say that certain things deserve stoning.

Actually, we all say that certain things deserve stoning in some form.

When the great prophet Moses dictated the Law in the wilderness, they didn’t have prison cells, guns, lethal injections, or even trees on which to hang people or crucify people. But they had stones, and for certain crimes, the community was to pick up stones and stone certain offenders to death.ⁱⁱⁱ

And in truth, we all hold stones... and we hurl them—in some form—don’t we? It’s actually how we hold our society together: We identify the person or problem and confine it or kill it. In fact, let’s do that right now.

Who do we think most deserves to get stoned; in other words: “What are the worst sins?” (Now don’t say, “*All sins are just the same,*” for Jesus said to Pilate, “*He who delivered me over to you has the greater sin.*”)

So, let’s hear some big ones: Murder... The Sexual Abuse of Children...Rape... Torture? How about “delivering Jesus over for crucifixion...”

Now, what are some smaller sins? How about Speeding... White lies...?

Now how would we rank all of them? --Imagine that six feet high—here (Peter shows height with his hand)—is the worst sin, and the least sin is like just an inch of the floor. What would be at the top?

- Maybe at the top: “Delivering Jesus over for crucifixion”— (Judas); Child Molesters
- In the middle: Adultery, Prostitution, or maybe systemic social injustice that leads to prostitution?
- At the bottom: White lies, Speeding, Double-knit polyester

Now, at what threshold (what level) should we stone people... or at least incarcerate people? If you say, “*At no level,*” then, I suggest you haven’t thought this through—and secretly wish to stone people like me right now.

We all think, “At some level there needs to be some recompense.” ...And yet, my question makes us all a bit nervous.

If you’re paying attention, you may have thought to yourself, “Didn’t my sins deliver Jesus up for crucifixion?” (Yep!) That should make you nervous.

You may also remember that St. Paul said that he was the “foremost of sinners.” *Not Judas...*and that should make you even more nervous, in a new sort of way.

And what if we all don’t agree on our ranking?

To commit adultery is a willful choice that destroys families, and there’s a good chance that this woman was a prostitute—so, where would you rank adultery or prostitution?

And where would you rank something like the systemic, misogynistic, sexist, and economic abuse of women that *leads* to prostitution? Where’s the man that committed adultery? And why is it only men conducting this trial of this woman?

I’m guessing that some of you, with a more conservative leaning, might rank adultery higher than some vague systemic injustice. And I bet some of you with a more liberal leaning would think just the opposite... You think: *It’s those men who should be stoned!*

So, what do we do at times like this when we cannot agree?

According to highly influential sociologist, Renee Girard, we do what we’ve already been doing: We find “scapegoats.”^{iv} ...More scapegoats. He argues that early in human history, frightened, confused, and lonely people discovered that they could unite by finding a common enemy—most preferably one that they could overpower and kill.

The term “scapegoat” is a reference to the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, when the high priest would confess the sins of Israel over two goats—one goat which was sacrificed to the Lord, and one which was released into the wilderness: not as a sacrifice, but as “the Scapegoat.”

Girard argues that this is how the social structures of this world are formed.

To unify a group, the leader naturally identifies a scapegoat, blames all the problems of the group on the scapegoat, and so by accusing the scapegoat of evil, the group is convinced that they, in fact, are good.

You’ve known this since you were a child. In junior high, you felt like you were on the inside, when you and your friends could ridicule someone on the outside—that was your scapegoat.

This game—this “blame game”—is the modus operandi of kingdoms, governments, and even what we call “churches.”

If I want to grow a church big and fast, it’s easiest to do so by finding a well-defined, tangible, and convenient scapegoat. For churches, that’s easiest to do by finding a group of sinners just over the agreed upon stoning threshold...Preferably a sin the folks in your church can easily resist but can clearly identify in others. By preaching that those *others* are evil, I can convince my folks that *we* are good, and so belong, and heaven is going to be awesome because *those people*—the scapegoats—won’t be there.

In other words: We win because others have lost: Game over!

And yet, it isn't over because the problems haven't really been solved; and so you have to keep finding scapegoats, and people don't always agree on the scapegoat... which puts you right back where you started, only smaller.

It's my experience that most United Methodists would stone *the men* who threw the woman at the feet of Jesus in the Temple before they would stone the woman who committed adultery.

It's also my experience that most Southern Baptists would stone the woman who made the choice to wreck a marriage... and accuse the Methodists of using "social justice" as an excuse for sexual sins.^v

Do you realize that the kingdoms of this world, "the Principalities and Powers of this world," just feed on your fleshly desire to find a scapegoat? They get power and money that way. CNN and FOX news both feed on your outrage.

It benefits CNN to tap into your outrage over sins of systemic discrimination. So you watch, and you think, "*Yeah I'm with these guys, because systemic discrimination is evil... so, let's stone the Pharisees at FOX news!*" And it benefits FOX news to tap into your outrage over the lack of personal responsibility that leads to things like abortion... "*So yeah, let's stone those tax collectors and sinners over at CNN!*"

It's obvious that our world is falling apart... *and* it's obvious that we comfort ourselves by finding others to blame—to accuse. But it's also become obvious that if we do this enough, each of us will end up alone—For if I think this is "The Game," I will play to win until everyone else has lost, and then I'll find myself utterly alone. I will have *gained the world and forfeited my soul...Right?*

But shouldn't someone get stoned? Something needs to be done about darkness, lies, death, and evil!

The command to stone offenders appears seven times in the Law of Moses:

#1 Exodus 19: If anyone touched the Holy Mountain, they were to be stoned. (Seems a bit vague, and dangerous, since God then told them to approach the mountain.)

#2 Leviticus 20: If you sacrifice a child to Molech, you were to be stoned. (Seems reasonable.)

#3 Leviticus 24: A guy gets in a fight and curses using God's name. Someone hears, and for blasphemy, God prescribes stoning.

#4 Numbers 15: A guy picks up sticks on the Sabbath. Someone sees him, and God prescribes stoning. (That will help you relax on the Sabbath!)

#5 Deuteronomy 13: If someone suggests worshipping another god, they are to be stoned. (So, next time someone says, "*Isn't that Lady Gaga just divine,*" just turn around and walk away.)

#6 Deuteronomy 21: If a son is "*stubborn and rebellious,*" he's to be stoned. (But over and over, we'll read in The Prophets that all of Israel is *stubborn and rebellious*.^{vi} "*[My people] are stubbornly rebellious,*" says God through Jeremiah.^{vii} Ezekiel claims that Jerusalem is worse than Sodom.^{viii})

#7 Deuteronomy 22: If a man marries a young woman and fails to find the evidence of her virginity, and no one can produce it, the men of the city are to stone her to death... (*That's horrifying!*) And even more so, when the prophets reveal that the Lord is betrothed to Jerusalem, who has been an unfaithful bride, and so everyone in Jerusalem deserves to be stoned... except Jesus, the Bridegroom.

When we feel blame, we naturally look for someone else to blame, and then we derive comfort from blaming others together. So, by the time of Jesus, it appears that most people wouldn't even risk saying the name of the Lord, for fear that it might be blasphemy.

[Video clip: *Life of Brian*
Handmade Films, 1979]

Scene opens with a man in chains standing in a ring by a Pharisee, with an angry mob of rock-throwers standing around.

Pharisee Now where were we?
 Man in chains Look! I don't think that it ought to be blasphemy—just saying "Jehovah."
The crowd (a mix of men and many woman with fake beards and all with stones in their hands) gasp in outrage at his words.

Pharisee You're only making it worse for yourself!
 Man in chains Making it worse?! How could it be worse?! (Man dances about kicking up dust, taunting as he sings) Jehovah! Jehovah! Jehovah!
 Pharisee I'm warning you! If you say "Jehovah" once more—
Pharisee gets hit in the head by a rock thrown by the crowd.

Pharisee All right! Who threw that?
All heads bow, looking around at each other's feet. Then fingers begin to point.
Crowd begins to mutter in high-pitched women's voices, suddenly realizing their error and going deeper and more masculine, pointing to a person in crowd Him! Him! Him...

Pharisee Was it you?
 Woman in crowd with fake beard Yes. Well, you did say "Jehovah."
Crowd turns on the fake beard person and begins to stone "him" at the mention of the name.
Pharisee stomps his feet as the rocks fly at the person in the crowd.

Pharisee Now look! No one is to stone anyone until I blow this whistle! Do you understand?! Even—and I want to make this absolutely clear—even if they do say "Jehovah!"
Rocks begin to fly. The crowd stones the Pharisee with their small rocks, as a group work together to heave a huge boulder onto him.

"It shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord [that's *Jehovah* or *Yahweh*] shall be saved,"^{ix} says the Lord, *Jehovah*, through Joel the prophet.

What is God doing? Trying to get us all killed?

To be saved, you must say "Jehovah" or "Yahweh," But say it, and you might get stoned.

I used to hate to read the Old Testament,^x because it seemed that, according to the Law of Moses, almost everyone deserved to get stoned. And then I'd read The Prophets, and it seemed that almost everyone did get stoned or would be stoned. And I had been taught that after they were stoned, they would then be endlessly tortured by God in a place called "hell."

But about twenty years ago, I went back and started reading The Prophets, daring to actually believe what they said. And I discovered that it wasn't "*most*" who would be stoned; it was "*all*."

The prophets would prophesy that God would destroy all the surrounding nations... and then prophesy just the same for Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem.

In seminary, it seemed that most scholars read these passages as hyperbole, and so "all" really means "most"... and the point was simply "God's pissed!"

And so, of course, we all feel blamed and look for someone else to blame, so *we* won't be blamed...and then we find ourselves feeling more and more and more *alone*.

But if we're honest with the text, what the prophets preach, is not "some," but "all." Here are just a few examples:

- Hosea 1:6,9 · "Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all... Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God."
- Ezekiel 43:8 · "[The people of Israel' (v.7)] have defiled my holy name by their abominations that they have committed, so I have consumed them in my anger."
- Habakkuk 2:13 · "Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?"
- Isaiah 66:24 (last verse in Isaiah) · "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me [1:2, 43:27, 48:8, 59:12-13: This is *everyone*.] For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."
- Zephaniah 3:8 · "'Therefore wait for me,' declares the Lord, 'for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.'"

Now, that's utterly intense, but this is what I find so fascinating:

If I believe it *kind of*, I get super anxious, begin to look for scapegoats, and feel very alone—and it's "*not good that the Adam is alone*."

But if I *really believe it*—that everybody must get stoned—I find that I relax; I suddenly feel like I'm not at all alone, and I can't think of anyone that I, myself, would like to stone.

Now, as far as we know, nobody smoked weed in first century Palestine. However, we do know that they often got drunk... together.

And as we noted a few weeks ago, this is why people often get drunk together today:
So they would not feel so all alone.

So, they'd stop trying to win by making others lose, stop trying to exalt themselves by humbling others, and so all agree to just humble themselves together, just lose together... and for a moment no longer feel so all alone.

We also noted that Scripture is very clear when it says: "*Don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit*." We noted that wine or pot can't actually do the job that needs to get done, but God has something more permanent and powerful.

We also noted that, through the prophets, God reveals that his judgment is a “*cup of staggering*,” that the whole world will be forced to drink. Jeremiah spells this out in great detail in chapter 25: It is a cup and a sword against “all the inhabitants of the earth.”^{xi} It’s wine that’s blood, and blood that’s wine; it kills the ego and will humble all people.^{xii}

“Oh... I would not feel so all alone, everybody must get stoned.”

Back to John 8... verse 5: The Scribes and Pharisees say:

⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. [We don’t know what he wrote. Some suggest that it was their sins; I suspect it was the Law and the Prophets.]

⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

So, did Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets?
...That’s a tough one.

Did he stone the offender?
...Well, no...but maybe yes.

He said, “*Neither do I condemn you,*” ...so, he didn’t *blame* her, as if she could have done differently and so should have done differently. And yet, he didn’t let her off the hook; he said, “*Go and sin no more.*” So, he clearly acknowledged her sin, and told her, “*No more. Stop doing that.*”

It’s like he separated her from her sin; he stoned her sin and freed her from herself—how did he do that?

And he didn’t just do that for her; he seemed to do that for those men. He didn’t stone them, but made them admit they *deserved* to be stoned.

They dropped their stones and thereby confessed that they were sinners... They were unfaithful Israel, they were the whoring Bride; they were the defiled temple...

It’s like he blamed them by not blaming them, those Pharisees. He told his disciples: “They’re blind—they don’t know what they’re doing.”

It’s like he condemned all of them, by not condemning.
It’s like he judged all of them, by not judging.
It’s like he didn’t stone anyone, but stoned everyone, by not stoning anyone.
It’s like he didn’t judge, but he is the Judgment. (John makes this clear)^{xiii}

It's like he didn't stone anyone; but he is the Stone by which everyone gets stoned....

How does he do that?

Last week, we looked at three of The Major Prophets; Daniel is usually considered to be the fourth. Like Ezekiel, he's among the exiles in Babylon, but serving in the house of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, for Daniel is of the house and lineage of King David.

In chapter 2 of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. And when his wise men can't reveal it nor interpret it, Nebuchadnezzar threatens to kill them all—until Daniel steps in and reveals the dream to King Nebuchadnezzar and then reveal its meaning, saying, *"There is a God in heaven, who reveals mysteries."*^{xiv}

He then says to Nebuchadnezzar:

- *"You saw a great image. Its head was made of Gold; that's you, that's Babylon. Its chest and arms were made of silver; it's the kingdom that follows you. (We know that was Persia or Medo-Persia.)*
- *"It's middle and thighs were bronze; it's the kingdom that follows the previous kingdom and rules all the land. (That appears to Greece under Alexander the great.)*
- *"And its feet were Iron mixed with clay and having ten toes..." (It looks like Rome)*

Scholars argue over the exact identity of the last two kingdoms. In chapter 7, they seem to be represented as four beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and then something else, like a dragon with ten horns.

Whatever the case, each of the kingdoms is built by men who unite their people by going to war and stoning scapegoats. Each kingdom is finite and so comes to an end. And Daniel describes the End... that never ends—it's not finite but infinite; it's not temporal but eternal; *and it's a stone.*

[Image: Daniel 2:34 on screen.]

³⁴ As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

So, literally, everybody gets stoned, by one stone, not cut and not thrown by any human hand. All the kingdoms of this world then blow away like chaff. And the thing that remains is this stone, that acts like a seed. For the stone grows as if it's a living stone; it grows into a mountain...and then it fills the whole earth.

Just like all the prophets, Daniel sees that everybody must get stoned.

And it's not only Daniel that sees the stone:

Zechariah sees the stone, but with seven eyes like the seven eyes of the lamb.^{xv}

Isaiah “sees” the stone and says, “the Lord of Hosts... will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling”^{xvi} And then he prophesies, “Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I [have laid] in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation: ‘He who believes will not be in haste’”^{xvii}

That means, “will not panic,” and that’s what usually makes us look for scapegoats and throw stones... panic and fear.

Paul, Peter, and Jesus all quote Isaiah regarding the stone.

But to the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus adds, “The one who falls on the stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, they will be crushed.”^{xviii}

Peter writes, “Come to him, to that living stone rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones, be built into a spiritual house. [That’s a temple.]” Then Peter quotes Isaiah.^{xix}

Paul quotes Isaiah and adds that there is no foundation other than Jesus: the Stone.^{xx}

So just like all the prophets, Daniel sees that everybody gets stoned. And yet, it seems that no one will be all alone.

In Daniel 7, in a dream, he sees all the beastly kingdoms destroyed. And then he sees “the Ancient of Days” give a kingdom to the “Son of Man.”

“And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

Get the picture? The Stone destroys everyone, and then it becomes the Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification, and Redemption *in* everyone. It literally becomes the Eternal Life in everyone. And everyone becomes a temple—a living temple.

The Stone is “The Son of Man,” the foundation of all things.

Now the prophets didn’t understand how all of this could possibly be true; it was a mystery. But they got the picture.

Once the church had become part of the Roman Empire, once the church had become institutionalized, we thought we had contained and explained the mystery, but it seems that we lost the picture...And so, we no longer believe the prophets and keep looking for scapegoats.

It’s all a bit shocking when you see it; it’s like we’re blind and don’t know what we’re doing. We must be blind!

Just look at these verses once again:

- Hosea 1:6,9 · “Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel to forgive them at all... Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God...” Next chapter: “And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My

People, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God.'" [Hosea 1:6,9; 2:23 (also Romans 9:25-26)]

- Ezekiel 3:8 · "[The people of Israel' (v.7)] have defiled my holy name by their abominations that they have committed, so I have consumed them in my anger." *Next verse*—"Now let them put away their whoring and the dead bodies of their kings far from me, and I will dwell in their midst forever." (Ezekiel 3:8-9)
- Habakkuk 2:13 · "Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?" *Next verse*—"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (Habakkuk 2:13-14)
- Isaiah 66:23 · "From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord." *Next verse, and last verse in Isaiah*: "And they ["all flesh"] shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled ["transgressed"] against me." [Isaiah 1:2, 43:27, 48:8, 59:12-13: That's everyone.] For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh (which is *all people* looking at the *corpses of all people*).

And check this out, Isaiah 53:12: Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors," for Isaiah 53:6 "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

He is our scapegoat! If you must blame, blame Jesus; you need no other.

Get the picture? Isaiah is saying that one day, in a new body, as a living Temple and the New Jerusalem, we will all look down on our own corpses in the Valley of Gehenna and together praise God, for he has delivered us from these bodies of sin and death in which we each are now trapped and alone.

The Immortal worm is holy, (God "alone has immortality.")^{xxi} And the Fire is divine.^{xxii}

- Zephaniah 3:8 · "Therefore wait for me," [Don't throw stones in haste.] declares the Lord, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed. *Next verse*: "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord. (Zephaniah 3:8-9)

The Prophets got the picture! --Even if they had no clue about the mystery. And yet to us, according to Paul, the Mystery has been revealed...^{xxiii} We can't entirely explain him, but we at least know his name.

In John 8:9, the Pharisees dropped their stones, but by the end of the chapter, they pick them up again to stone Jesus, for he tells them, "*Before Abraham was, I AM.*" But Jesus slips away, and they can't catch him until Friday—Good Friday... Then they hurl all their stones.

So, when did the stone not cut by human hands hit the "principalities and powers," the kingdoms of this world?

- Well, I believe it was the moment that eternity touches time.
- It was *the end of the Sixth Day* and *the edge of the eternal Seventh, God's Rest.*
- It was Good Friday.

- It was the Moment that “the stone rejected by men, but in God’s sight, chosen and precious,” the Foundation stone, the Corner Stone, lifted his head, and said, “It is finished,” and delivered up his Spirit.

What is finished?

All the kingdoms of this world, all the business of this world, all the “principalities and powers of this world,” all the games that we play in this world. Finished by the one who is the End, but also the Beginning... the Life, eternal.

A few years ago, Professor James Carse from NYU wrote a book about “finite games and infinite games,” which is now making some waves in the business and leadership crowd.

He argues that finite games are played for the purpose of winning, so you play in order to stop playing—you win and wonder why you played. ^{xxiv}

Most businesses are a finite game, you play to make the most money, then stop and wonder why you played. You win but aren’t sure what you win. Politics and Religion are often finite games--you win the election and wonder why you played; you build the biggest church and never know what one is.

Scapegoating and the blame game—it’s a finite game; you kill your scapegoat, win the world, and forfeit your soul.

According to Carse, a *finite game* is a game you play to win, and so stop playing. An *infinite game* is a game you play to never stop, so no one wins... or perhaps everyone constantly loses... and constantly wins.

To me, an infinite game sounds like a great dance, some children at play, or a wonderful party—if you party to win, you’ve never experienced a party.

I read about some missionaries in East Asia that set up a croquet game in their yard. Some Negrito tribesmen became interested and wanted to join the fun. So, the missionaries explained the game, and how at a certain point you could knock an opponent’s ball out of the court and out of the game.

One of the tribesmen looked puzzled and asked, “*Why would I want to do that?*”

The missionary explained, “*So you can win the game!*”

The little man, clad in only a loincloth, shook his head in bewilderment and kept playing... But the tribesmen didn’t play like the missionaries played.

When a player successfully got through the wickets, the game wasn’t over for that player. He went back and gave advice to his friends. It was entirely a team effort until the last and least player got his ball through the last wicket. And only then did they begin to dance and sing, shouting, “We won, we won!” And yet, they were still winning and had been winning all along. ^{xxv}

See, I think they were winning even while they were playing that finite game. They were playing the infinite game in a finite world.

So, is Love a finite game that you can win by beating your neighbor? Or is Love an *infinite* game that you can begin to play in this finite world?

Is Life, a finite game, that you can “win,” and so stop playing (you die)? ...or...
Is Life infinite, and eternal, wherein you continually lose your soul and find it; lose yourself and find yourself dancing; sacrifice yourself and find yourself risen from the dead? Like a dance?

The Stone that hit this world on Good Friday is the End of all our finite games, because it's the presence of the infinite game that really isn't a game—a better name for it would be “Reality,” or the Judgment of God, or Eternal Life: many persons and one substance in the great dance called love.

Some people listen to this and think: *So . . . Does anyone lose? Does anyone or anything lose?*

Yes! Death loses, darkness loses, lies lose, Hades loses, divisions lose, the accuser loses, evil loses . . . We will know what evil is, but constantly choose the good in freedom—that's the infinite game.

Communion

This is the Infinite Game:
(Peter points to communion table.)

He, the Stone, took the bread and broke it saying, “This is my Body given to you, take and eat.” And in the same manner, he took the cup saying, “This is the eternal covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you—the cup of staggering.”

So why do we come here each week? Or even watch on line, and have communion at home online?
Isn't it to drop our stones, and begin to worship? ...To stop playing finite games and begin to live an Eternal Life.

He says, *“Let him who is without sin among you throw the first stone...”*

At that, maybe you drop your stone... Or maybe you throw it at him... for you realize he just insulted your ego, and after all he's the one that made you in the first place.

You throw it at him. And at that, he lifts his head, says, *“Father forgive them; they don't know what they're doing... It is finished...”* and he delivers up his spirit.”

You die with him and rise with him, singing, “We win. We win. We win!”

And all our stones? They fall at the base of the tree, and there on the foundation stone, they're built into a temple—that is a city, and a bride, with Infinite and Eternal Life even in this finite and temporal world.

Several years ago, my wife said, “Peter, Jesus wants us to place 12 stones at the foot of the cross—it's an *Ebenezer*.” In Hebrew, that means “Stone of Help.”

Jesus is our Helper, and we are his Bride, and a pile of stones helps us to remember who he is, who we are, and what it is that we do.

As you come to the table this morning, I want you to bring a stone...

Perhaps it's labeled "for a Democrat" or "for a Republican, Fascist or Socialist," "Adulterer or Perpetrator of Social injustice."

Perhaps it just bears the name of your ex-wife, or ex-husband.

Picture that stone that you like to hurl at others... you know what it is.

And as you take communion, let it drop from your hand...

It's with these stones that Jesus builds his church—not a finite institution of this world, but an outpost of his infinite and eternal kingdom... His Sanctuary^{xxvi}

Prayer

So, Lord God, we confess to you that we actually thought you were playing our finite games. But you're the infinite dance. You are eternal Life and Relentless Love. And so, Lord God, we surrender our judgments to your judgment, your Grace. So, Lord God, when our bodies die, we could get right on to the singing. We could just keep on singing, and wouldn't be stuck in this finite game."

If you feel like you're stuck in the finite game right now, you could just say to Jesus, "You know, I don't want to play this game anymore." And he looks at you and says, "Good! You are forgiven." That's the Infinite Game.

Now go, and sin no more.

Believe the Gospel.

Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ They "test him," but of course they were led into this testing to be tested, to be judged.

ⁱⁱ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. –Matthew 5:17-20

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Now a days we hire the police to do such things, or we pay taxes to purchase bombs and pilots and a military, to do such things. Perhaps it's healthier to hold the stone yourself...

iv "Once upon a time there was a group of hominids that found itself unable to do anything in concert because of rivalry among them. Each one found himself inwardly compelled to imitate some other. As the imitation became more successful he found himself a rival of his model, and the more like the model he became the more violent became the rivalry. Cooperation was impossible until one day, the greatest day in the history of human culture, the two of them discovered that it was possible to agree on one thing, to agree to kill someone else. This was such a compelling possibility that the whole group imitated them, and so the first moment of human solidarity happened as the fellowship of the lynch mob." [Robert Hamerton-Kelly, "Sacred Violence and the Messiah: A Hermeneutical Meditation on the Marcan Passion Narrative (Unpublished paper), pp.6-7. Quoted by James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, p. 7]

Two elements of Girard's theory stand out from the "likely story" as told thus far. The first is the relationship between desire and imitation, or what Girard calls "mimetic desire." ... The concept of mimetic desire thus serves as Girard's basis for explaining how human society disintegrates into bloodshed.

The second element that stands out from this portion of the "likely story" concerns the process by which human society puts itself back together. Girard calls this process the "victimage mechanism." A scapegoat is selected and killed. Human society reunites itself in the process. The scapegoat is blamed for whatever seems to be threatening or disrupting society at the time. Any person, party, or group will suffice for the role of scapegoat so long as it is sufficiently alien or deviant from the mores of the prevailing culture, while also being sufficiently vulnerable to be seized, accused, and killed. Conflict in society is thus resolved through the victimization of a despised though innocent party. At least this is how it was in the beginning.

-- George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, p.23-24

v Thu Dec 27, 7:27 AM EST

Robed Greek Orthodox and Armenian priests went at each other with brooms and stones inside the Church of the Nativity on Thursday as long-standing rivalries erupted in violence during holiday cleaning.

The basilica, built over the grotto in Bethlehem where Christians believe Jesus was born, is administered jointly by Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic authorities. Any perceived encroachment on one group's turf can set off vicious feuds.

On Thursday, dozens of priests and cleaners came to the fortress-like church to scrub and sweep the floors, walls and rafters ahead of the Armenian and Orthodox Christmas, celebrated in the first week of January. Thousands of tourists visited the church this week for Christmas celebrations.

But the cleanup turned ugly after some of the Orthodox faithful stepped inside the Armenian church's section, touching off a scuffle between about 50 Greek Orthodox and 30 Armenians.

Palestinian police, armed with batons and shields, quickly formed a human cordon to separate the two sides so the cleaning could continue, then ordered an Associated Press photographer out of the church.

Four people, some with blood running from their faces, were slightly wounded.

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vi Lamentations 3:42-45 for instance. These are the words of Jeremiah: "We have transgressed and rebelled; You have not pardoned. You have covered *yourself* with anger And pursued us; You have slain *and* not pitied. You have covered Yourself with a cloud, That prayer should not pass through. You have made us an offscouring and refuse In the midst of the peoples.

vii Jeremiah 4:17

viii Ezekiel 5:6, 16:48

ix Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, Romans 10:13

x If you think this stuff is only confined to the Old Testament, check out Acts 5:1-11, 12:20-31, The Revelation.

xi Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. ¹⁶They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them."

¹⁷So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it: ¹⁸Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day; ¹⁹Pharaoh king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, ²⁰and all the mixed tribes among them; all the kings of the land of Uz and all the kings of the land of the Philistines (Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod); ²¹Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon; ²²all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea; ²³Dedan, Tema, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair; ²⁴all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert; ²⁵all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media; ²⁶all the kings of the north, far and near, one after another, and all the kingdoms of the world that are on the face of the earth. And after them the king of Babylon shall drink. ²⁷"Then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the sword that I am sending among you.' ²⁸"And if they refuse to accept

the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: You must drink! ²⁹ For behold, I begin to work disaster at the city that is called by my name [Jerusalem], and shall you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, declares the Lord of hosts.' ³⁰ "You, therefore, shall prophesy against them all these words, and say to them: "The Lord will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice; he will roar mightily against his fold, and shout, like those who tread grapes, [Jesus tramples the wine press of the wrath of God] against all the inhabitants of the earth. ³¹ The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against the nations; he is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the wicked [who is not wicked?] he will put to the sword, declares the Lord.' – Jeremiah 25:15-31

^{xii} See also Isaiah 51:17-23, Isaiah 63:1-6, Zechariah 12:1-3, Words of institution at the Supper, the Bowls of Wrath in the Revelation

^{xiii} As we've preached many times in the Gospel of John Jesus reveals that he "judges no one," and that "the Father has given all judgment to the son." And yet, by Jesus will all be judged, and "his words" will judge on the last day.

^{xiv} Daniel 2:28

^{xv} Zechariah 3:9, Revelation 5:6

^{xvi} Isaiah 8:14

^{xvii} ...thus, says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am laying ['I have laid,' perfect tense] in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'He who believes will not be in haste.' –Isaiah 28:16 RSV

Supposedly Adam was/is made on the foundation stone, which was where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, David offered to sacrifice himself, and Solomon built the temple where countless thousands of lambs and goats were sacrificed... on that same mountain Jesus sacrificed himself and Adam was finished in the image of God.

^{xviii} Matthew 21: 42-44

^{xix} 1 Peter 2:4-6

^{xx} 1 Corinthians 3:11

^{xxi} 1 Timothy 6:16

^{xxii} What is the immortal worm? Scripture says that God alone has immortality.

On the cross, Jesus recited the start of Psalm 22 when He said, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And then He died. In Psalm 22, Jesus goes on to say, "I am a worm and no man... You lay me in the dust of death."

You know, the worms in Gehenna *ate death*. They turned rotting meat into fertile soil. Doctors now use worms in patients with gangrene and dying flesh, for the worms will *only eat* the dead flesh. So they purify living flesh better than any surgeon's scalpel ever could.

When these types of worms eat their fill and run out of food, they form a chrysalis and turn into a butterfly.

This word *worm* [Hebrew: *tolaw*] is also translated *scarlet*, because from these worms they made red die. It was used in the temple as a symbol of the blood of sacrifice. I just think that's kind of cool.

The worm will not die, and the fire cannot be quenched. Well, that fire is immortal fire... Eternal Fire. And Scripture says, "Our God is a consuming fire." That fire burns away the old man, and the new man is not consumed.

John said that Jesus came to baptize us with fire. The fire fell on the disciples at Pentecost and filled them with life, and the same fire will fall on the *whole earth* at the end of time.

–from Sermon, "Everybody must get stoned," 5-11-08

Years ago I was wrestling with the wonderful truth that God makes all things new, but I was stuck on the identity of this worm. I went to bed praying, "God everything makes sense, except that worm. What is that worm?" In the morning I found that a friend had sent me a long elaborate vision she had about my calling. Toward the end she describes some worms she sees in some soil that is to receive a new planting. She wrote:

"They [the worms] are PURE God created... Ok, Peter, here's the deal. I have been waiting on the Lord for four days now on this one section of the dream. What He keeps giving to me is Mark 9: Verses 44, 46, and 48. These come from Isaiah 66:24 the last verse of Isaiah. I see the correlation of what you have been preaching recently here. I see the fruit of after the burning that the worm remains to produce fertile soil, perhaps? It is what earth worms do but I suspect that the worms that Isaiah speaks of may not be earth worms? However, this is what I see and what God would have you do is understand this portion of the dream through these scriptures. That's all I know." – Faith Donaldson 3-3-2006

^{xxiii} 1 Corinthians 2:8-10

xxiv "There are at least two kinds of games: finite and infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play. Finite games are those instrumental activities - from sports to politics to wars - in which the participants obey rules, recognize boundaries and announce winners and losers. The infinite game - there is only one - includes any authentic interaction, from touching to culture, that changes rules, plays with boundaries and exists solely for the purpose of continuing the game. A finite player seeks power; the infinite one displays self-sufficient strength. Finite games are theatrical, necessitating an audience; infinite ones are dramatic, involving participants..." - James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, a Vision of Life as Play and Possibility, Ballantine Books, 1986 (from the cover of the paperback edition)

xxv Some missionaries in the Philippines set up a croquet game in their front yard. Several of their Agta Negrito neighbors became interested and wanted to join the fun. The missionaries explained the game and started them out, each with a mallet and ball. As the game progressed, opportunity came for one of the players to take advantage of another by knocking that person's ball out of the court. A missionary explained the procedure, but his advice only puzzled the Negrito friend. "Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court?" he asked. "So you will be the one to win!" a missionary said. The short-statured man, clad only in a loincloth, shook his head in bewilderment. Competition is generally ruled out in a hunting and gathering society, where people survive not by competing but by sharing equally in every activity.

The game continued, but no one followed the missionaries' advice. When a player successfully got through all the wickets, the game was not over for him. He went back and gave aid and advice to his fellows. As the final player moved toward the last wicket, the affair was still very much a team effort. And finally, when the last wicket was played, the "team" shouted happily, "We won! We won!"

That is how the Church, the body of Christ, should be. We're a team. We all win together.
-James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988) pp. 123-124.

xxvi One of the distinctive sights for residents of and visitors to Bogota, Columbia is the Church of the Penitents. It stands at an elevation of 10,4000 feet above sea level. It was built over 300 years ago by penitents who carried up two bricks for each sin committed.

A spectator beholding the building and recalling that each two bricks represents one sin could exclaim: "A church of sins!" or "A church which sins built!" Although none of the original contributors of bricks is alive today, the bricks nevertheless perpetuate the memory of their sins.

[It seems that the person that wrote this (most likely a Protestant), may not have understood that "where sin increased grace abounded all the more." It's not a church that sin built; It's the church that Grace built, and Grace is happy to use our sins.]

- Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1979), p. 1654-1655.