

Roman Soldiers and God's Judgment

Mark 15:15–24
Frank Walker, Ph.D.

There's no way to make Jesus' suffering pretty. So, as we go through today's text, we come across many unpleasant details to consider. But his suffering included a lot more than the abuse of the Jews and the Romans. These things were just a part of his total suffering. The greater part — the part that atones for our sins — came from his Father, who poured the full weight of his wrath on him as the punishment for our transgressions. Jesus' suffering, therefore, reminds us of the greatness of our sins and the immeasurable love of God that sent his Son into the world to save us.

This explains a rather curious statement in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. The prophet wrote, *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand* (Isa. 53:10). How could the Father delight in his Son's pain? Was it because he was a vengeful and sadistic monster? Not at all. It was because his Son's agony was the means of accomplishing our salvation. The Lord removed his wrath from us by inflicting it on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Few men could have borne Jesus' physical suffering, but no mere man could have faced God's wrath without shaking his fist in God's face and cursing him. But Jesus did. He could do this because he was also God, the second person of the Trinity. Question 17 of our catechism asks, "Why must he also be true God? Ans. That by the power of His Godhead He might bear in His manhood the burden of God's wrath, and so obtain for and restore to us righteousness and life." Jesus bore his suffering by the strength of his divine nature.

Pilate's Scourging

The suffering Jesus experienced in today's text began with Pontius Pilate. Verse 19 says that he gave in to the will of the people, who had threatened to report him to Caesar if he let Jesus go. So, he handed Jesus over to the torturers to flog him. With Roman executions, flogging often preceded crucifixion.

But what is scourging or flogging? Most of us have seen movies set in the pre-Civil War South when disobedient slaves were whipped mercilessly. They're hard to watch, but such whippings were considerably restrained compared to Roman flogging. In the first century, the man to be flogged was

tied to a post so that his back was arched for maximum access. Two floggers took turns beating him, one on each side, with braided leather straps embedded with a piece of brass, bone or glass, which tore through the person's skin and muscle to expose his tendons and bones and arteries, and sometimes even his internal organs. Some men never made it to their crosses because they died from the flogging itself, which the Romans called 'the halfway death.'

So, even at this point, Jesus' suffering was beyond anything we can imagine. But we have to understand it because it affects what the soldiers did to him later. Imagine his continuing agony as the soldiers beat him, often and perhaps purposely striking his tenderest wounds. And what about the pain he felt as they removed his garments, robed him in different clothes, and then dressed him in his own clothes again? And how could he have carried his cross on his back when his back was little more than hamburger?

Jesus bore all of this for us and he did so trusting his Father to accomplish his redemptive purposes. Isaiah wrote, *I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed* (Isa. 50:6–7).

The Soldiers

After the soldiers flogged Jesus, they took him back to Pilate's judgment hall. By this time, the whole band of Roman soldiers had gathered together, i.e., approximately six hundred men. It sounds like most of them were present. So, we're not talking about a small group of mockers who taunted and beat Jesus, but a very large one.

The soldiers first clothed Jesus with purple, the color of royalty. They did this to mock the claim that he was the King of the Jews. But not having any royal garments available, they likely used part of a soldier's uniform, which was so stained with blood from battle that Matthew described it not as purple but as scarlet (Matt. 27:28). And it was probably far too short to maintain any semblance of modesty for the Lord.

After clothing Jesus in purple, the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns and put it on his head. Commentators debate which plant these thorns came from — some species produced thorns over three inches long. One thing is certain, though. Our Lord's inglorious crown was mashed into his skull. Verse 19 says that the soldiers beat him on the head with a reed while he was still wearing it.

These thorns also take us back to our original point, viz., that the crucifixion was more about God's judgment than man's. When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground for his sake, promising that

it would bring forth thorns and thistles. By wearing a crown of thorns, which was also meant as a taunt, Jesus took the curse on himself.

Next, verse 18 says, *And [the soldiers] began to salute [Jesus], Hail, King of the Jews!* They were trained to greet Caesar by exclaiming, ‘Hail, Caesar!’ Here they pretended to honor Jesus in the same way. Then they beat him on his head with a reed, no doubt the same one they put in his right hand as a fake scepter, according to Matthew 27:29–30. After a while, they took it from him again and beat him with it. ‘What a king,’ they must have thought to themselves, ‘a king that can be clobbered with his own scepter!’ They further showed their contempt for the Lord by spitting on him and pretending to worship him, unaware that the day is coming in which every knee would bow before him as the king of all creation. Paul wrote, *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth* (Phil. 2:9–10).

After all this, the soldiers mocked Jesus even more as they gave him his own clothes and led him out to be crucified.

Simon the Cyrenian

In the first century, it was also common for condemned men to carry their own crosses to the place of execution. They probably didn’t carry the entire cross (i.e., both the horizontal and vertical beams), which would have weighed several hundred pounds, but just the horizontal beam called the *patibulum*, which by itself weighed about a hundred pounds.

Jesus bore his own cross at first. John 19:17 says, *And [Jesus] bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha.* But he couldn’t carry it the whole way because of the abuse he had endured. So, the soldiers conscripted a passerby named Simon from Cyrene to carry it for him. Jesus once told his disciples, *Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me* (Mark 8:34). Simon did this literally.

Mark used an interesting word to describe Simon — *compel*. This word was commonly used for leading livestock to slaughter. It probably means that Simon wanted nothing to do with Jesus’ death. Maybe he was afraid of what the soldiers might do to him. But in the end, it turned out for his good. He watched the crucifixion, read the accusation the soldiers posted above Jesus’ head, witnessed the scorn of everyone making fun of Jesus, and heard the centurion cry out, *Truly this man was the Son of God* (v. 39). Perhaps Jesus even evangelized him from the cross. He preached to the thief. Why not to Simon, too? Anyway, the Spirit of God used everything Simon saw and heard to bring him to faith in God’s appointed Messiah.

How do we know this? Look how Mark described him — not just a Cyrenian, but also *the father of Alexander and Rufus*. Did he include this detail because Simon’s sons were known to his readers? Remember that Mark wrote his gospel for the Romans. Twenty years later, when the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome, he mentioned a man named Rufus. He wrote, *Salute Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine* (Rom. 16:13). Although Paul hadn’t yet visited this church, he seems to have known Rufus’ family very well.

The Lord takes an interest in each of his people. Second Timothy 2:19 says, *Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his*.

Golgotha

To continue, Jesus and those who led him eventually arrived at the place of crucifixion, known as Golgotha, an Aramaic word that means ‘the place of the skull.’ We don’t know where this was or why it was given this name. Maybe it had a topographical feature that resembled a skull, or perhaps someone found a skull there. Maybe it was called Golgotha because it doubled as a graveyard. In fact, Jesus was buried there. John wrote, *Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews’ preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand* (John 19:41–42).

Before the soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross, they offered him an analgesic concoction. Matthew said that it was vinegar mixed with gall (Matt. 27:34), reflecting the prophecy of Psalm 69:21, but Mark described it as *wine mingled with myrrh*. They’re both telling us that the soldiers offered him bad wine mixed with something very bitter. But Jesus refused to accept it. Why? For one thing, he wanted to remain fully alert and clear-thinking. Although he had completed most of his teaching ministry, he still had a few things to say. We call them his ‘seven sayings’ or his ‘seven last words.’ Jesus also refused the sedative because he wanted to feel the full weight of God’s fury in order to save us from it. He wanted to experience the everlasting punishment of body and soul in our place and amazingly did it all in the space of just a few hours.

The last thing we read in our text is that the soldiers cut up Jesus’ garments, taking little pieces of fabric home, but cast lots for his seamless outer cloak. John noted that this fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 22:18. He wrote, *Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots* (John 19:23–24). It has always amazed me that the soldiers were

content with so little when they could have had everlasting life instead. Unbelievers always think they have a good deal going, but they're only exchanging everything for nothing.

Today's text confronts us with our Savior's suffering. He suffered and died for our sins, just as God said he would. Isaiah wrote, *He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isa. 53:3–6).

But I believe Mark wanted his Roman readers to see something more. Jesus once said, *If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you* (John 15:20). Those who identify with him must be prepared to face similar trials. We have to embrace the cross, like Simon. Roman Christians faced it themselves later in the first century when Nero used them as scapegoats for the burning of Rome. He tied them to posts, covered them with pitch, set them on fire, and used them to light the streets at night. More organized persecution came a few decades later under Domitian, who instituted a worldwide attack on the church of Jesus Christ.

Jesus didn't die to free us from persecution. He died to satisfy God's wrath in our place by shedding his blood. And if we preach this truth, our persecution is guaranteed, as Paul wrote to Timothy, *Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution* (2 Tim. 3:12). We're able to testify to God's grace and bear its consequences only because our Savior only died for our sins, rose again and is now seated at his Father's right hand far above all power and authority.

We serve a Savior who completely saves those who come to him by faith. Amen.