

**24 Hours That Changed the World:
Torture & Humiliation
Isaiah 53:4-12 and Mark 15:15b-23
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The Gospels differ somewhat in their accounts of what exactly happened during the hours of Friday morning. Luke is the only writer who tells us that Pilate sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee where Jesus had lived. Herod happened to be in Jerusalem, and Pilate was looking for a way to shift responsibility to him for the verdict calling for Jesus' death. Luke tells us that Herod questioned Jesus at length and when Jesus refused to reply, Herod treated him with contempt, mocking him and placing an "elegant robe" on him before sending Jesus back to Pilate.

John's Gospel tells us that Pilate sent Jesus to be flogged before passing sentence on him. Pilate seemed to hope that the Jewish leaders would see flogging as sufficient punishment and drop their demands for Jesus' crucifixion. The soldiers flogged and mocked Jesus, placing a crown of thorns on his brow and dressing him in a purple robe before bringing him back to Pilate, bloodied and humiliated. Pilate presented Jesus to the crowd, but unmoved to pity, they once more called for his death.

Matthew and Mark tell us Jesus was flogged, then taken away by the Roman guards, where they mocked and humiliated him before taking him to be crucified. Flogging was common in Jesus' day. It is the practice of striking someone with a whip or a stick for punishment or torture. In its most severe forms a leather whip was braided with bits of stone, metal, glass or bone designed to tear as well as bruise the flesh. Prisoners sometimes died of their wounds before they ever made it to their crucifixions, but part of the cruelty inherent in flogging, was that such deaths were the exception. Flogging was designed to inflict incredible pain and damage but to leave the victim with just enough strength to carry his cross to the crucifixion site.

The accounts of Jesus' torture and humiliation follow closely the words of Isaiah 50, particularly verse 6 which says, "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."

Jesus did not beg for mercy or demonstrate any of the behaviors expected of someone being flogged, and that may well have angered the soldiers administering his punishment. Not content to tear his flesh, they also sought to dehumanize him, to break his spirit. Mark tells us that the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace and called together the “whole cohort.” A cohort typically consisted of between 300 and 600 soldiers. The entire company, perhaps all those stationed in the Antonia Fortress, came out for some sport at the expense of the prisoner.

Matthew tells us the soldiers stripped Jesus naked, leaving him exposed and vulnerable, a bloodied, weakened man surrounded by hundreds of Rome’s finest. They decided to hold a mock coronation and brought him a robe, perhaps one of their own robes. It would not have concealed Jesus’ nakedness, merely covered up his bloody back. The newly robed king, of course, needed a crown, and the soldiers twisted a branch from a thorn tree into a rough oval that parodied the royal laurel wreath. Then they pressed it down onto his brow so that the thorns dug into his flesh.

“Hail, King of the Jews!” they shouted, saluting him. Matthew adds the detail that they took a reed, likely something along the order of a cattail, and put it in his hand as a mock scepter, another parody, this time of the king’s rod of authority. They circled him, spitting on him and striking him in the face. They took the reed and used it to lash him, not so much to inflict pain as to add to his humiliation.

As hard as it is to hear these details, it is this picture, this shamefully cruel and inhumane sport at the expense of a tormented man, that we need to fix on. For it is here that we get a clear and tragic glimpse of what humanity did when God took on flesh and walked among us. Jesus could have destroyed them all with a word. Instead, he bore the shame and humiliation, in part so that all who came after him could learn something about the human condition and about the costliness of God’s grace.

We must ask ourselves why the soldiers did these things. What kind of men were they to torture and humiliate him? In every part of this story we have met people who did things that are difficult to imagine: the Sanhedrin demanding that Jesus be put to death; Pilate sentencing him to satisfy the crowd; now Roman soldiers taking delight in tearing the flesh from his bones, then spitting on him. Were all of these hundreds of soldiers evil? Or did their role as occupiers in a foreign land and their constant awareness of the desire of the locals to be rid of them, bring out this inhumanity?

As I read this part of Jesus' story, I am reminded of the images of the Abu Ghraib prison, where during the Iraq War, American soldiers stripped Iraqis naked, mocked them, humiliated them, and photographed their handiwork. What could possibly lead men and women to do such things? Were they bad people, or did their circumstances somehow bring out this behavior? Are there times when we as ordinary people lose our humanity and, in our fear, find ourselves supporting policies and practices that in other, better times we would have resisted?

Throughout this series we have had the opportunity to see ourselves as part of this story, and I invite you now to see yourself in the Roman soldiers. As we do that, it helps us recognize that throughout history human beings have been capable of inhumanity toward one another. As painful, even unthinkable, as it seems to be, it is the story of our existence, and research has born out the conclusion that all of us—every single one of us—are capable of being transformed from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. Given the right combination of ideology, authority, and gradual desensitization, even decent, ordinary people can be persuaded to do extraordinary and awful things.

When the soldiers were done with Jesus, they put his clothes back on him and led him from the courtyard of Pilate's fortress toward the rocky hill on which he would be crucified. It's Latin name is Calvary—*Calvaria* means "skull"—and Golgotha is the Aramaic equivalent. Calvary was about a third of a mile from Pilate's palace and in Jesus' weakened state, would have taken about half an hour. Jesus carried his own cross, likely just the crossbeam, as the vertical beam was probably left in place at the site of the executions. When he was too dehydrated and weak to go on, Simon of Cyrene helped him the rest of the way.

Near the end of the journey someone offered Jesus a drink of wine mixed with myrrh. It is thought that myrrh acted as an analgesic, something to deaden pain; so this appears to be an act of compassion intended to help numb Jesus to the worst of the agony. One wonders if Mary, seeing this gesture, thought back to Jesus' birth when myrrh was presented to her son by the magi. It would have seemed a curious gift at the time, but now it was understood as prophetic.

Although Jesus had had nothing to eat or drink since the Passover meal, he refused the offer of a painkiller. It is as if he was saying, "I will bear the full brunt of what I am called to do. I will not deaden the pain with drugs." His suffering was for the purpose of redemption, for our atonement. It was part of God's plan for him and the world, and he was determined to experience it fully.

Last week we looked at the substitutionary theory of atonement, the idea that Jesus, an innocent man, suffered and died in place of the guilty, in place of all of us. Another theory of atonement, the subjective or moral influence theory, says that the atonement was not about changing God or making it possible for God to forgive us. It was, rather, about changing you and me. Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection constitute a divine drama meant to communicate God's Word to humanity, to make clear to us our need for redemption and forgiveness and to show the full extent of God's love for us, love which will lead us to repentance. John's Gospel begins by speaking of Jesus as God's Word. Jesus was God's vehicle for communicating with us, God's Word made flesh. In Jesus, God's divine nature was united with human flesh to reveal his character, his love and his will for humankind.

What was God saying, then, in the suffering and death of Jesus? The events of the last 24 hours of Jesus' life speak first of the brokenness of humanity. Each of the people taking part in this tragedy is a reflection of that brokenness. The disciples fell asleep, then fled in fear as Jesus was arrested. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied him. The Sanhedrin wished him dead. The crowds preferred a messiah preaching violence to a messiah preaching love. The governor wished to satisfy the crowd, and the soldiers took delight in torturing and dehumanizing an innocent man.

This story of what human beings did when God walked among us is an indictment of humanity. We are meant to find ourselves in that story and to be moved by its tragic end. We are meant to realize there is something deeply wrong with us, that we are broken and in need of forgiveness.

When my family lived in Europe, we had the opportunity to visit Dachau, the German concentration camp outside Munich. Emily and David were about 6 and 3 at the time, and one of the most striking things to me about that trip was something I didn't actually notice until a couple of weeks later. We took a lot of pictures while we were there, and once we were back in England and had the pictures developed I noticed that none of us smiled in a single picture we took. Even my normally rambunctious 3-year old son who never stopped climbing and running and laughing was oddly sedate and unsmiling, even though he was too young to have any idea what this place was about. There was simply a feeling about the place that affected all of us, even a 3-year old.

Jesus' passion is meant to have that same kind of impact. It's a story that should deeply affect those who hear it. Jesus' suffering and death act as a mirror

that when held up to our hearts exposes the pettiness, self-centeredness, jealousy, spiritual blindness and darkness that lurk in all of us. We are meant to see Jesus being tortured, humiliated and crucified and say, “Lord have mercy on us,” or “Never again!” or “God save us from ourselves.” If we enter the stories as we are intended to, we cannot help but be moved to repentance.

But, the brokenness of humanity is not the only word we are intended to hear in this story. We are also meant to see the love of the One who suffers for us. Jesus demonstrates a love that refuses to give up or to give in to vengeance. He is determined to love his enemies in order to win freedom for them and restore them to their rightful relationships as beloved children and friends. Jesus sets an example for us of a kind of love that alone has the power to save humanity from its self-destructive ways. It is only sacrificial love that can transform enemies into friends and truly change the human heart.

In November, 2004, Tammy Duckworth, a reservist called up to fight in Iraq, was copilot of a Black Hawk helicopter that was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade that exploded at her feet, severing her legs and crushing her arm. By the time the chopper crash-landed, it appeared she was dead. The soldiers in the helicopter with Tammy knew the enemy would be on their way to the crash site and that if they were captured, they would likely be killed, but they refused to leave Tammy behind. They worked to extract her from the helicopter, then carried her through fields of six-foot tall grass at great personal risk in order to get her out. When they finally reached safety, they realized that although he had lost half her blood, she was, miraculously, alive. She eventually recovered, was fitted for prosthetics, and is now fully mobile.

After serving as the director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, in 2009 she was confirmed by the US Senate as an assistant secretary for the VA. When asked how she felt about the extreme risk her fellow soldiers took to save her, Major Duckworth said, “You have to get up every day and seek to live in such a way as to be worthy of that kind of effort and sacrifice.”

That is exactly what the cross of Christ is meant to inspire us to do, to live in such a way as to be worthy of Jesus’ sacrifice. We do that by loving as he loved us—not just loving those who deserve it but loving those who don’t, loving sacrificially. When we understand what Christ has done for us, how can we do anything else?