

Healed by His Wounds
Mark 15:15-20
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¹⁵ ***Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.***

¹⁶ ***The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.*** ¹⁷ ***They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him.*** ¹⁸ ***And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!"*** ¹⁹ ***Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him.*** ²⁰ ***And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.***

Sometimes we'll be playing in our house and wrestling around and there arises a need for a hero. That's usually when our son, Andrew, disappears for a few minutes then returns triumphantly with this (show whip). This is not an ordinary whip, let me show you. As Andrew returns to the scene, he takes on the bad guy, usually me, and becomes the hero with this whip, complete with background music (plays theme to Indiana Jones).

This is a fun little toy that is carefully designed NOT to inflict any pain. Andrew loves his Lego Indiana Jones video game and so he got this for his birthday. We know that whips are not toys, but rather are tools used by cowboys herding cattle or were instruments of cruelty used to literally "beat" lessons into slaves or prisoners or captive peoples throughout history. Whips weren't usually used to kill people, just to leave permanent physical and psychological scars. As they were applied to human beings, they were tools of torture implemented to subdue or control others. There was nothing heroic about their use on people.

There is actually very little information about how the whip was used on Jesus from within the New Testament. In fact there is no information describing the flogging of Jesus, only a few words to say that it happened. Take a look at the way Mark puts it in his gospel (Mark 15:15, TNIV)

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

Almost cavalier, just a few understated words. Why doesn't Mark, or any of the other gospel writers give us any more information than this? Probably because these few words were all the early Christians needed.

(Show images of flogging from "Passion")

Their eyes had seen the reality of a Roman flogging; images of flesh and muscle being torn off the body by a whip studded with bone or stone or metal balls or glass. One witness to Roman flogging wrote, "The sufferer's veins were laid bare. The very muscles and tendons and bowels of the victim were laid open to exposure." (Lee Strobel – Preaching Today).

I was lead Pastor in a church in Hannibal, MO when the movie, "The Passion of the Christ" came out. The theatre in Hannibal offered a free viewing to pastors in the area the night before it opened to the public. The theatre was packed with pastors, and I met a few colleagues there and sat with them. I don't know what I was thinking, it was probably just habit, but I carried a tub of popcorn and a big coke in with me. How many of you saw that movie on a big screen? Then you understand why I had to set the food and drink aside after a while. There was no way I could eat or drink with the images of brutality I was seeing. I know it was just actors, but I have to think that the reality was not much different. I will never see that movie again. I don't need to.

The gospel writers may have seemed a bit casual as they slipped this information into the larger story, but for inhabitants of the Roman world, no description was necessary.

The intention of a flogging prior to crucifixion was two-fold. It was a display of power meant to deter others from making the mistake of messing with Rome. It demonstrated the merciless nature with which Roman authority deals with rebels and criminals. They wanted people to see that this torture would not kill you, but that you would wish that it had.

The second intention of flogging in connection with crucifixion was to weaken the victim, leaving them just enough strength to suffer for a while on the cross, but not for too long.

For nearly 300 more years, the followers of Jesus understood and identified with this picture of Jesus, whose flesh had been ripped from his body by a whip. These followers often found themselves in similar places as Jesus did – and just as Jesus said they would – on the wrong end of a whip. They could understand how obedience to the way of Jesus could lead to social, economic, and physical persecution. The way the world turned on Jesus is the same way it turned on them. And when it did, his strength to overcome became their strength. Being true to his mission empowered them to stay true to him, even under extreme duress.

There may be some Christ followers in the world who really connect with this story. There are certainly Christians in other parts of the world whose faith puts them in danger of persecution. They live in cultures that are very hostile to Jesus and his followers. There may be some here that have endured or are enduring physical or mental abuse or may have experienced oppression because of race or something else. To those folks, knowing that Jesus endured this kind of brutality lets you know that he really does understand what you are going through. And maybe all of us can take comfort to some degree by simply knowing that whatever hardship we are going through, Jesus understands our pain. He knows pain, he understands what we feel like when we've been abandoned, betrayed, falsely accused, or suffering in pain. He knows that because he's experienced that.

By and large, however, I find it hard to believe that many of us here (who live in America in the 20th and 21st Centuries) can fully identify with this kind of brutality and torture. I guess I am saying that I feel a disconnect with this story. I don't have any experiences that are even in the same ballpark as this.

So when I try to find myself in this story, I'm not sure where I am. Unlike some Christians in the past and even in the present, I have never felt threatened, much less brutalized because of my faith. Yet I don't connect with the brutality of the soldiers, and I've never witnessed violence beyond the level of an NFL game with my own eyes. Even as I watched the dramatic presentation of this event in the movie theater, I felt disconnected from what I was watching, that it was surreal.

Truthfully, since I am middle class, white, and living in USA, it's easier for me to indentify with the people of power in this story than with someone who chooses to lay all power aside. I mean, when did you ever lay all your personal power aside? Imagine giving up the power of the God of the universe? I find it much easier to relate to the people who were trying to protect something that was important to them. I get that. I've done that!

So I guess the quest for me this week was just to get a better handle on the torture and humiliation of Jesus. I have a handle on the cross; Jesus dies in my place to pay the price for my sin. While I don't have any experience with the cross, I can at least see its purpose. But what is the purpose of his torture and humiliation before the cross? That's the question to me. Why does Jesus have to endure this? Is it just the necessary motions that come before the cross or is there something more to it? Why does God choose this path and what does that mean for the way I live out my faith today?

When we look back to the Old Testament, we see a strong image of a messiah who would save his people through his suffering instead of through military might. The picture of this kind of messiah was not a foreign concept to the people of Israel, it just wasn't the kind of messiah that they really wanted.

Isaiah 53:4-9 (TNIV) predicted that the messiah would be rejected by God's people, would suffer and be mocked, but would not strike back.

***4 Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.***

***5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.***

***6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.***

**7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

**8 By oppression [a] and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished. [b]**

**9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.**

Doesn't that look very much like what is happening in our passage today? Just so you have an idea, this section of Isaiah was written while Israel was in exile in Babylonia in the sixth century BC. So the notion that God was going to save his people through suffering was not new.

It's also evident that Jesus chooses this path. He never plays the victim, never whines about the injustice of all this. What Jesus does is lay aside all of his power and willfully takes the journey through suffering to the cross. In John's gospel, Jesus calls himself the "good shepherd" and talks about the voluntary path he will take to save his sheep. He says that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, then he adds, "No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord" John 10:18. So Jesus is in the Praetorium, being dressed up in the purple robe and having the crown on thorns shoved down on his head, because he has chosen to be there.

I believe that Jesus had the power and could have taken the whip in his hand, but instead he chose to take the whip on his back. So the suffering, humiliation and torture of Jesus are more than the necessary motions before the cross. There is redemptive purpose in this story, and that purpose is to demonstrate what God is willing to go through to save us.

You know, sometimes love shows itself by what it is willing to endure. The redemptive purpose in this story is that we are finally shown what God has wanted us to know all along. God wants us to undeniably see his love for us demonstrated through suffering...through what he is willing to endure for us.

After a prisoner escaped from the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz, all the other prisoners were lined up and 10 would be picked out for a special, torturous death in the "bunker". The bunker was an underground confinement with very little light, and no food. Prisoners were sent there for a long, slow death, to deter others from escaping.

This day, the commandant began randomly picking out 10 people to die. One of the people he chose was Francis Gajowniczek. As he was called, Francis began to cry out, "No, I have a wife and children". That was when Father Maximilian Kolbe stepped out of line and volunteered to take his place. Kolbe was a Polish Catholic priest who was arrested by the Gestapo for sheltering over 2000 Jews.

Commandant Karl Fritzsche accepted Kolbe's offer and he went into the bunker with the other nine. During their confinement, Kolbe led the others in song and prayer. After 3 weeks, Kolbe and 3 others remained alive, but the bunker was needed for others. He was killed by lethal injection.

On the 10th of October, 1982, Maximilian Kolbe was canonized as a saint by Pope John Paul II. In the crowd that day was Francis Gajowniczek, and his children and his grandchildren. Kolbe gave the ultimate gift and demonstrated God's love through his suffering and death for someone else. Gajowniczek's life was redeemed. It was a gift he may not have deserved and certainly could never repay.

Jesus' suffering and death go hand in hand in the redemptive work of God for us, God saving us. We call this the atonement, the at-one-ment with God that brings us sinners into a forgiven and whole relationship with God through the gift of Jesus' sacrifice for us. We can look at the atonement through lots of different lenses – the idea being that there is not just one way that God redeems us, but several different ways we can see God's redemption. One of those ways is called the Moral Theory of Atonement, which basically is saying that Jesus' suffering demonstrates God's limitless love for us.

James Keifer describes it like this: "Christ came to win people's hearts by an example of reconciling love." This love is a gift. It's a gift we clearly don't deserve, could never earn or repay, and cannot purchase. But it is a gift for you. It is God's demonstration of love for you.

The suffering of Jesus is one of the ways that God puts love into action in undeniable fashion. Maybe it's not so difficult after all to see what God is doing here. We may not connect to the violence, but we all have benefited in some way from someone else's sacrifice and suffering. The freedoms we often take for granted in our country are gifts from others who suffered and sacrificed for them. More personally, I hope we can all name someone who demonstrated God's love to us through the gift of their sacrifice. We cannot repay those who have sacrificed for us, but we can carry their gift forward.

And I think this is exactly how we apply the story of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice to our lives today. We are called to carry this gift forward to others through our sacrifice. The early Christians clearly understood this. Any time they endured suffering for the Gospel, their prayer was that Jesus' love would be made visible to others through their sacrifice.

We're not all called to the ultimate sacrifice like Maximillian Kolbe. But as followers of Jesus, it's pretty clear that we are called to selfless, sacrificial living that powerfully demonstrates God's love to others. What does this look like for you? Is there anything you are doing in your life that to an outsider would look like it's selfless and sacrificial?

This is not about responding out of guilt either. This is discovering real life! Jesus is pretty clear throughout his ministry that life is found in giving yourself to God's purposes; selflessly and sacrificially. If you want to experience the power of God, then give yourself away. What I came to realize in my journey with this story is that Jesus' torture and humiliation are not disconnected from the rest of his ministry. His life was filled with selflessness and sacrifice intended to share God's love with people. So I guess his suffering and crucifixion are really just his ultimate effort to do what he'd been doing all along: demonstrate God's love.

Jesus laid his life aside to demonstrate how much God loves you. You can accept that gift today, if you haven't already, with a simple prayer of Sorry, Thank You, Please. That's good news.

And when we answer the call to follow him, we're invited to demonstrate God's love to others through selfless sacrifice. So I just want to invite you once again, if you're not already doing something in the community, use the Simple Serve brochure to find a place to give yourself away and demonstrate God's love to someone else. That's sharing the good news.