

The Torture and Humiliation of The King

I remember back in 2004 when Mel Gibson released his self-funded film, *The Passion of the Christ*, that there was quite a bit of controversy over it. Among the various outcries was the particularly noticeable criticism over the violence of the film. As you remember, and I'm sure that quite a few of you have seen it, it received a well-deserved 'R' rating, because of the graphic violence – in fact, I believe it became the largest grossing 'R' rated film of all time.

It is a curious thing to realize that it was mostly the Christians (i.e., believers) who most strongly objected to the violence in that film... curious, because if we believe that the Gospel accounts of this last 24 Hour period of Jesus' life are anywhere close to accurate, the violence is an unavoidable *part* of the story. That wasn't something that Mel Gibson made up to heighten the drama of a movie. It *is* the story.

This is what happened, it really happened. And yet, even we who supposedly understand the purpose in it all (as we read last week from Isaiah 53 - *the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed*) yet, we recoil from facing it. We would rather skip over that part. We'd rather tell the story without the pain. Now, I wonder why that is...

In this last 24 hours of Jesus' life we're now at about 8 in the morning on Friday. Luke alone mentions that Jesus was sent from Pilate to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who just happened to be in Jerusalem at the time – perhaps Pilate was hoping to pass along any responsibility for Jesus' execution to someone else higher up in the political food chain.

Luke reports that Herod questioned Jesus at length; but Jesus refused to reply to him. And Herod's reaction to Jesus' silence was very similar to that of Pilate's, the Roman guard, and the members of the Sanhedrin – he became enraged. He treated Jesus with contempt. He couldn't break him, he couldn't get a reaction out of him, so he mocked him, he “dressed him in an elegant robe”, and sent him back to Pilate, who then ordered his execution.

One of the most vivid scenes in Gibson's *Passion*, other than the crucifixion itself, was that of the flogging of Jesus by the Roman guard. It was hard to watch, and I remember thinking, “OK, enough already”... but it went on and on.

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Flogging was a common means of punishment in Jesus' day, and has been used by many different cultures in history, and even still today in some places.

Flogging (or scourging) is the practice of striking someone with a whip or stick. Some of you are old enough to remember the corporal punishment meted out by some of our parents and even school teachers – with a ruler, a hand, or a belt. (Back before some blessed soul came up with the concept of 'time-out'! What a break through that was!)

[Time outs never worked well with our kids, though. They had too much imagination, and it didn't bother them to be set apart. So we discovered a much more potent form of motivation...fines! We made them pay for their offenses – literally. "That's going to cost you a dollar!" Boy, did that work!]

There were various degrees of flogging that the Romans utilized – some were lighter, for less weighty crimes, but other methods were simply designed to instill terror. And they were so brutal that even the most hardened spectators would turn away. They couldn't watch.

Let me share with you part of the description of flogging that many of you have read in Adam Hamilton's book 24 Hours that Changed the World:

Such beatings had, as you might guess, a great deterrent effect. In one form of Roman flogging, the victim was stripped and forced to bend over a post to which he was strapped, his hands tied down. Two or more lectors (Roman bodyguards who were specially trained in the art of inflicting pain through flogging) took turns striking the victim with whips. The flagrum or whip was made of leather, braided with bits of stone, metal, glass, bone, or other sharp objects specially designed to tear as well as bruise flesh...Prisoners sometimes died before they ever made it to their crucifixions. Part of the cruelty inherent in flogging, though, 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.¹

You're seeing some illustrations on screen of what the Roman whips looked like – this second one is called a "Scorpion" (for obvious reasons.)

¹ 24 Hours That Changed the World p. 81 – 82

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Now, it's not my intention to go into any more detail here about the physical descriptions of a scourging/ flogging. But at the same time, I want us to be intentional and *not* look quickly away here today...as we realize that this was part of the price of our Salvation. This is what it cost Jesus.

*And this wasn't all of it. The Crown of Thorns was another piece - a masterstroke of humiliation, combining both the physical pain of those huge thorns being pressed into the sensitive scalp, but also representing the mockery of the supposed "Kingship" of Jesus by those with the 'real' power. "So you're a king, eh? Well then, let's give you a crown!"

In our culture, I doubt if there is a more demeaning act from one person to another than to spit on someone. It is an action that boils down sheer disdain for another person's humanity, it is saying, "You are nothing... dirt to me." Its interesting that in Mark 10, a passage where Jesus is looking ahead; he is predicting to the Disciples what was going to happen when he went to Jerusalem for this Passover, and he says this:

They will condemn [the Son of Man] to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles,³⁴ who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.

As Jesus began to anticipate where this story was heading, he's thinking – not *just* about the actual Crucifixion, but about the humiliation, the torture and the pain that would precede that. I want to suggest to you today that the Atonement didn't simply take place on the Cross. The Atonement – the 'at-one-ment' between us and God encompassed the whole of Jesus' life, as well as his death.

Atonement started with the Incarnation, with God becoming human. It continued with Jesus' healings, and teachings with his growing up as a young man, a teenager, and a young adult. The Atonement was taking place as Jesus sat and had dinner with 'sinners', when he forgave cheaters and thieves; it was unfolding as he turned over the moneychanger's tables in the Temple and pronounced his seven "Woes" upon the Pharisees and all those who twist God's commands into something that simply benefits ourselves.

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So, of course, the Atonement was also taking place in the sufferings of Jesus on this terrible day, in the torture, in the mocking... And I'd like us to think together here today, as to how that was? What was being accomplished *for us* through this part of the story that we'd rather not think about?

Before I explain what *I* think was happening in this, let me share a story with you. This is a tragic story, and while it is painful to hear, it is also representative of a hundred, a thousand similar stories that we, in this community, in our extended families, could share – if we were willing and able. So, I'm inviting you to think of how you yourselves might relate to the struggle of this man, as he shares how his world came so close to crumbling down...

In the fall of 2002, a man - Rick Garmon – had a daughter, Katie, who became a victim of date rape. She was 18-years-old at the time and a freshman in college. Too humiliated to speak about what had happened—even with her family—Katie switched schools and attempted to move on with her life.

However, the scars of that traumatic event began to fester. Over the next 14 months, she withdrew from her family and friends. She developed an eating disorder and began losing weight. Finally confronted by her mother, Julie, Katie confessed the truth. Fortunately, after a year of fervent prayer and support, and counseling, Katie was able to overcome her pain and return to a normal life.

Unfortunately, Katie was not the only one struggling with inner-demons during that year. Her father was fighting his own battle against the desire for revenge at any cost. In fact, as soon as he heard the news, Rick Garmon developed a plan to kill the man who had so deeply wounded his daughter. These are his words:

I pulled back from Julie and everybody else. Get up, go to work, think about the plan, try to forget, go home, try to go to sleep, dream the plan. I plotted to drive through the campus and use my Smith and Wesson .243 caliber, bolt-action rifle.... I'd sit in the parking lot as long as necessary until he walked by. Then I could get it out of my head, and Katie could start eating again.

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Katie came home for the weekend two months after the truth came out. It tore me up to see her. She and I didn't talk much anymore. I missed watching the Atlanta Braves with her. I missed laughing with her. I just plain missed her....

Julie tried to tempt her with a great meal on Saturday. Sitting across from Katie, I kept my eyes on my food. It felt as though we lived in a funeral home. The only sounds were clanking of silverware and the clinking of ice. I couldn't take the phoniness. I slammed my chair to the table and took off to my room in the basement. I'd spent a lot of time down there in my getaway room of guns and the sports channel. Methodically, I started cleaning the rifle I'd use.

Then I heard [my son] Thomas trotting downstairs. "Whatcha doing, Dad?" I kept on cleaning and never looked at him. I rocked in my recliner with the gun across my lap.

"Can I help you clean?" I didn't say a word. "You going hunting?" I looked up at him, his eyes so brown they looked almost black, just like mine. He stood inches from my knees. His hair, cut to match a G. I. Joe flattop, just like mine. I kept my gaze on my son and moved the red rag around in circles.

Our eyes met. Thomas's eyes brimmed with tears. He knows. Dear, God. I think my son knows my plan.

I stopped polishing the gun and laid it on the floor by the chair. "Come here, boy. Give your daddy a hug." He wrapped his arms around me tight as a cobra. Thomas's love was somehow stronger than my hatred. His hug began to crumble my rage like a sledgehammer breaking a wall. Chip by chip.

Sweet Jesus, what have I been thinking? My job's not finished. Forgive me. Thomas isn't raised. If I go to jail, he won't have a father. God, help me.

Locking the gun in the cabinet, I made a choice to forgive. God, I gotta let go of this hate. It's killing me. The decision started in my head, not from any feeling. Swallowing back tears, Thomas and I walked upstairs together, my arm on his shoulder. I came so close.²

In Hebrews 4:14-16 we read this:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

As we recoil from the suffering of Jesus, I'm suggesting here that we should first be asking ourselves "why". Why did this happen – what was the point of it all? We've been seeing through this Lenten study that one 'result' of Jesus' terrible experience in his trial, the beatings, the mocking, etc., is that the true brokenness of our human nature has been revealed. Jesus was like a bright light in a dark room – it was all there, for all to see.

² Rick Garmon, "My Secret Hate," Today's Christian (May/June 2006), p. 35-36

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No one was spared from the white hot, blazing light of God's holiness in Christ; everything was revealed as it is, as we are – broken, clueless, shallow, selfish; capable of goodness, yes, but also capable of unimaginable evil. Evil that we inflict on one another. Jesus experienced that along with us:

His *friends* abandoned him, his *closest followers*... denial and betrayal. The *people in charge* of keeping rule in the society turned into machines of hurt – and when they didn't get the reaction they wanted, they added scorn, and humiliation to the sheer physical pain. The *political leaders* caved in to the pressure of the crowds – their desire for acceptance was much greater than their desire to do what was right. The *religious leaders* – the ones who, perhaps had the *least* excuse – well, they started it all! Because of their fear, misunderstanding, pride, and self-interest.

All were revealed. Exposed. And Jesus *took it*... he took it all.

And that, really, is a second consequence of this day's events. Not only have we *been revealed*, not only can we see in the Passion accounts the evil that we are capable of as fallen human beings. But we realize: not only have we *done* some of these things, but there's not one of us who has never been on the *receiving* end of those same acts. We all – like Rick Garmon bear our own scars and 'soul bruises' from being treated by others in the same way that Jesus was treated.

In Isaiah 50:6 we read:

*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.*

It was clear that Jesus was not only *receiving* these things, this suffering... but in a profound sense, he was *taking it upon himself*. And as a result of this, we, the followers of Christ, can identify – we can participate – in his victory. The Apostle Paul writes often about how the 'children of God' identify with Christ – he says, in his death, *we* have died. In his Resurrection, *we live!* And in his victory over the worst things that people can do to other people – the *power* of evil has been broken.

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What does this mean? It doesn't mean that we aren't affected by evil, pain, or hurt. Of course we are; we are human. We hurt – we cry, sometimes we are devastated. But in the end, we come to realize that these *mere things* have no ultimate power over us. Nothing that finds it's being in this world alone can have authority over us.

Jesus has not only defeated death, he has triumphed over evil, and he calls us to join in his triumphal procession. Because we are participating in his victory, we are able to take the hurts and the evil that we receive in this life, and we can choose to respond as Jesus did: forgiving, forgetting, healing, triumphing. We share in Christ's victory.

Jesus then, invites us to enter into his life, his death, his victory – to join with the voices of countless believers, and the myriads of angels and shout out to the forces of darkness: *You have no power over me! Christ has won! And so have I!*

I went out to the Lebanon State Forest last Monday, to the same area that I showed you on the video a few weeks ago. It was a rainy day, if you remember, but it also was the first time in many weeks that I walked out there without seeing snow on the ground. Well, the lack of snow revealed a lot. I sent Kimberly a text message that said something like “Lebanon State Forest had a tough winter.”

It really has. Everywhere you look you can see signs of the 3 or 4 Nor'easters we experienced. The high winds and layers of heavy snow have taken their toll. There are trees still bent over, and I wonder if they will ever straighten up. There are many that have simply snapped – many of them 6 – 7 inches in diameter. Some have just blown over from the soft ground.

And everywhere you turn, the ground is covered with broken branches... some just sticks, some with needles on them. everywhere... debris.

And, I guess, some might look at that and say that it's ugly. But as I walked through, I had the perspective of 10 years, and all those miles, of walking in that forest. So, I can remember other

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times when ‘bad things’ happened out there: ice storms, tornadoes, numerous fires, droughts, gypsy moths... you name it. But each time, nature prevailed.

And I know that the fires open up seed packets that are waiting for just the right heat. I know that those broken branches are going to be absorbed into the soil and provide nutrients for the blueberry bushes and scrub pines that will be growing there in the future. Out of the bad, will come good.

In the Scriptures we see the same thing happening. Peter denies Jesus three times – but even before he utters his first oath, Jesus says to him, “When you have turned, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus knew that Peter’s defeat was not the last word.

As Jesus was walking to Golgotha, weak, and bleeding due to the scourging, he stumbles in carrying the cross. And the Roman guards conscript a man – someone who just happened to be there by the road to carry it for him. His name was Simon. He was from Cyrene, a region in Northern Africa.

You can just imagine his story, can’t you? Here ‘s a man who travels a long way to attend the Passover in Jerusalem. This likely was the trip of a lifetime for him. And right in the middle of the festivities, this holy day, he is forced to do the work of a slave. He has to carry a cross – actually the horizontal beam, which weighed nearly 100 pounds – for a man who was so beat up and weak that he must have been difficult to even look at. And he walked behind Jesus all the way to the Calvary. His assumption would likely have been that this man was just a criminal going to his execution, but it seems that even those few moments with Jesus were enough for Simon to sense that this was no ordinary man.

He could have come home and said, “That have to have been one of the worst days of my life... I’ll never get that image out of my mind.” But there is good reason to connect this Simon with one of his sons, (Rufus) whom Paul greets in Romans 16:13. The point is that it seems that this very brief – and unexpected – encounter that Simon had with Jesus was enough that he became a believer himself.

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Because Jesus was not a victim. He was taking on the suffering of the world, and leading us to a way of responding to it that we could follow. He took not only our death, but our pain, and he has won! And so have we.