



Mark 15:16–20

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 spat 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.

Reflection

Among the Jews scourging was limited to forty lashes, but the Romans were restricted to nothing but their strength and whim. The whip was the dreaded flagellum, made by plaiting pieces of bone or lead into leather thongs. The victim was stripped and tied to a post. Severe flogging not only reduced the body to a bloody pulp but could open up the body until the bones were visible and the entrails exposed. As can be imagined, flogging as an independent punishment often ended

in death. It was also used to weaken the prisoner before crucifixion.

This was Pontius Pilate's farewell kiss to Jesus. That and giving his soldiers permission to do with him as they will, which is the subject of our passage today. Jesus, after having been flogged, is taken by the soldiers to the Praetorium as we read beginning in verse 16,

16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers.

These are Pilate's soldiers. Their sadistic behaviour speaks much to his character; what is about to unfold is happening on his watch, and under his approval. Jesus

is still reeling from the shock and horror of being brutally flogged. His vision's blurred, blood's running down his back and his ribs, he can barely stand. They take him to Herod's palace, out into the courtyard, as entertainment for the whole company of guards on duty there. A full contingent would have numbered 600, it's likely the numbers were significantly less, but certainly scores more are drawn in to be complicit in the murder of the Lord of Life. Judas, the chief priests and elders, the high priest, the whole of the Sanhedrin, Pilate, the Jewish crowds and now this whole company of soldiers. They watch on with bloodlust and idle amusement. Today we see humanity at its worst. From verse 17,

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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 spat 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.

They strip Jesus down to his undergarments and dress him in a robe. For Mark and John, it's purple, mocking this so-called 'king'. For Matthew, it's scarlet; perhaps it quickly becomes so as it soaks up Jesus' blood. The robe was most likely the short red cloak worn by Roman military, variously described in ancient sources as scarlet and purple in colour; the ancients didn't discriminate among colours as close-

ly as we do.

Next they weave together a wreath, like the one worn by Caesar. They make it out of razor sharp thorns and crush it down onto Jesus' head. The thorns bite and blood runs down his face, he's blinking back blood, but can barely feel the additional pain. Caesar's robe and crown, now for his royal sceptre. They place a staff in Jesus' right hand. And then to the loud guffaws of their compatriots they kneel in front of him, calling out, not 'Ave, Caesar!' but the foreign equivalent to add some spice,

“Hail, king of the Jews!”

But this isn't enough. As the laughter dries up and they begin tire of their sport, they spit on him. They rip the staff out of his

hand and hit Jesus in the head with it, time and time again. He barely has the strength to raise his hands as they rain down blow after blow. The crown of razor thorns is driven deeper into his head as he is blinded by his own blood. He can barely see where the blows are coming from. Verse 20,

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.

They dress him again in a half-hearted attempt to try and cover-up something of what they'd done. This was unusual, prisoners were usually led to their crucifixion near naked. Perhaps they'd overstepped, or perhaps they didn't want to incite any

more than was strictly necessary these
Passover crowds. And Jesus, the one
who'd healed thousands, is led bleeding
and bloodied and almost unrecognisable
away to a Roman cross.

Isaiah said of this one, some seven hun-
dred years before,

3 He was despised and rejected by
mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar
with pain.

Like one from whom people hide
their faces

he was despised, and we held
him in low esteem.

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 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.

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.

10 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,

and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,

he will see his offspring and prolong his days,

and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,

he will see the light of life and be satisfied;

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,

and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,

and he will divide the spoils with the strong,

because he poured out his life unto death,

and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors. Isa 53:3–12

Think & Pray

Meditate over Isaiah's words today as you force the tears back from your eyes. Or let them flow not just for what we did to Jesus but for the depravity in our human nature that can enjoy doing this to fellow human beings. Pray for Christians who are suffering a similar fate even in our supposedly civilized world today. And praise God for our Suffering Servant Jesus Christ who could look upon some of these soldiers who did this to him in our passage today, and say,

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

While they divided up his clothes. And Jesus' prayer was not in vain. In Mark's words,

39 And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

If there is hope for men like these then there is hope for people like us. No matter what you've done; no matter the life you've lived. All you need to do right now to have eternal life is stare into the face of a man who could die like this and still speak words like these and believe.