

The Hands of Brutality

27 Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. 30 They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. 31 After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Sally was a good kid, a well-adjusted 10-year-old who got along well with her classmates and often had a smile on her face. But halfway through her fifth grade year, that began to change. She grew distant, distracted, guarded in her responses. Her parents tried to engage her in conversation. They asked, "Is there something wrong? How can we help?" But their daughter refused to open up. They were at a loss to know what had caused such a change in their loved one. And then they saw them. The bruises on her arms. Immediately, they scheduled a meeting with the school principal. After some prodding and a whole lot of tears, Sally finally broke down and admitted that she was being bullied by a number of other students in her school. She was still trying to deal with the emotional and physical wounds.

These days, bullying doesn't happen only among the kids at school. It happens between spouses in their homes. It happens on the job or on social media. Bullying is often described as a pattern of behavior that is used to leverage power or control over another person. It's sometimes divided into three main categories. There is verbal bullying, which involves things like name-calling or threats of violence. There is social bullying, which involves deliberately excluding or ostracizing and individual or encouraging others to do the same. And then there's physical bullying, which occurs when property is damaged as a threat of future violence or when someone actually lays hands on that other person by hitting, pushing, kicking, tripping or worse.

Although bullying has got a lot of attention recently (there's even a website titled, "Stopbullying.gov"), the fact is, bullying is not a new phenomenon. It's been going on for thousands of years. In fact, if you think about it, didn't Jesus himself experience all three categories of bullying in his life? His enemies, primarily the Jewish religious leaders, routinely engaged in verbal bullying of Jesus. They badgered Jesus with questions that were clearly designed to trap him, to embarrass him, or to get people to turn against him. You know the ones. "Jesus, should we pay taxes to Caesar or shouldn't we? Jesus, by whose authority are you doing these miracles? Jesus, what if a woman is married seven times, who will be her husband in heaven?"

But Jesus' enemies not only engaged in verbal bullying, they also practiced social bullying. They did everything in their power to dissuade people from following Jesus. Remember how the Pharisees just ripped into the man who was born blind because he gave Jesus credit for healing him? In the end they threw that man out of the Temple. The Pharisees were constantly accusing the crowds of being deceived by that impostor from Galilee.

But of course, the most egregious example of bullying took place in the last few days of his life. In the account that we have before us here in Matthew 27, we see Jesus endure what is basically a case of assault and battery—all at the hands of the Roman soldiers. Today we take up

what we might call:

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The account that we have before us is actually the second instance of brutality directed at Jesus. Earlier on that very evening, it was the Jewish officials who put Jesus on trial in their form of a kangaroo court. Although they were desperately trying to manufacture some evidence to be able to convict Jesus of a crime, they couldn't make anything stick. So finally, they resorted to just mocking him mercilessly. They blindfolded their defendant, hit him in the face with their fists and said, "*Prophesy, to us, Christ, who hit you?*" Scripture tells us that these same officials mocked Jesus and spit in his face. But that was only the start of the brutality. Things only got worse when Jesus was handed over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Actually, after Pilate interviewed Jesus, he came to the conclusion that Jesus was an innocent man. Pilate tried to set Jesus free. But the Jewish leaders would have none of that. They egged on the crowds to demand that Pilate release a murderer named Barabbas, rather than let Jesus go. So Pilate tried another tactic. He decided he would make a play for people's pity. He figured that if he would allow Jesus to be brutalized the way that only the Romans could do it, then the blood thirst of the Jews would be satisfied. But in the end, that didn't work. It only put Jesus through more agony, more brutality.

Pilate handed Jesus over to a whole company of Roman soldiers, as many as six hundred men. At Pilate's command, the soldiers first flogged Jesus. They used what was called a flagrum, a multi-strand whip, tipped with pieces of lead. It was designed to tear open the flesh and cause massive bleeding and internal injuries. Because this scourging was so violent, the Jews limited the number of lashes a person could receive. The Romans, however, had no such limit, but in a kind of twisted irony, they saw scourging as a form of mercy, because typically, the more flogging a person receive, the less time they would spend on a cross, because their death would come that much more swiftly. But of course, in Jesus case, flogging didn't hasten his death. Jesus died exactly when he decided to give up his life. For Jesus, the flogging only made the lead up to his death all the more painful.

But it wasn't just pain that Jesus endured at the hands of his enemies. There was also the shame and ridicule. Seeking to provide a little entertainment for themselves, these Roman soldiers decided dress up this "King of the Jews" to fit the part. They put a purple robe on him, probably an old soldier's uniform. They twisted the branches of a thorn bush together and pounded it onto his head. And they stuck a stick of some kind in his hand. And then as Matthew tells us, *Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. (Matthew 27:29-30).* Can you imagine, a whole company of soldiers, ruthlessly mocking the perfect Son of God? Spitting in the face of the God who had created every one of them? Repeatedly beating the one who had shown everyone he met nothing but love? With every blow that Jesus endured, whether it was physical or verbal, Jesus was fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah, *I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. (Isaiah 53:7).*

Now, you realize, there are a lot of aggressive fathers—and more than a few mothers, too—who would argue that the way to handle the behavior of a bully is to fight back. "You've got to give them what they have coming. You've got to punch the bully in the mouth," they say. Was that Jesus' response to those who bullied him? No, quite the opposite. How did the Prophet describe our Savior? *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 her shearers is silent, so he did not open his*

mouth. (Isaiah 53:7). The One who had taught his followers to turn the other cheek, to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you was putting his preaching into practice in the most trying of circumstances.

The question is, Why? Why would Jesus do that? Why would Jesus willingly subject himself to such brutality? Two reasons. First, because he knew this was God's will for his life. He knew that this was all a part of God's master plan. The Prophet Isaiah had declared it 700 years earlier when he wrote, *It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. (Isaiah 53:10).* In fact, didn't Jesus confirm that fact in the garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed, "Father, is there any other way? Is there any other way for your will to be done other than me drinking this bitter cup of suffering?" You know the answer to that question, and Jesus' response: "Not my will, but yours be done."

But there's a second reason that Jesus allowed himself to endure that brutal treatment at the hands of his enemies. He did it, not just for his Father. He did it for you, and me. Think about it. Jesus is our substitute. That means that everything he went through in the final hours of his life he suffered in our place. That also means that if he did not go through it, we would have to. And I don't mean we'd have to endure a few hours on a flogging post or an executioner's cross. I mean, we'd have to endure an eternity in hell! But because Jesus did suffer the way he did, you and I can be sure that we never will.

Remember that the next time you think about the brutal treatment that Jesus received in his final hours, as you think about the blood on Jesus forehead, the stripes on his back, the nails in his hands and feet. As thoroughly as Jesus was brutalized, so thoroughly are you and I forgiven. In fact, the ancient Church Father John Chrysostom, who lived in the days just after the Nicene Creed was penned, once offered this perspective on why Jesus' whole body had to suffer such brutality. He wrote, *"Because sin dwells and is active in all our members, therefore Christ desired to suffer for all our sins in all his members."* Or to put it another way, as thoroughly as Jesus was beaten, so thoroughly are we redeemed, from head to toe.

And yet, there is one more reason that Jesus allowed himself to be bullied. And that is, so that we don't have to be. It's been said that bullies are out to control other people, to make them feel weak, or inferior, or alone. Or to get them to do what the bully wants them to do. Well, in reality, there is no bigger bully than the devil. Our enemy, The Devil, is constantly picking on us, trying to find the chink in our armor, trying to leverage our weaknesses to his advantage, trying to get us to think that we have no choice but to give into his temptations. And then when we do fall into sin, he comes at us all the harder, beating us up for our failure to keep God's commands, running us down for our moral deficiencies, and basically telling us that we're all losers. For you see, that's what bullies do.

But here's the good news. The big bully Satan has met his match. Even though he was able to land a painful blow on Jesus, the fact is, in so doing, the serpent Satan got his head crushed, just as our Father promised would happen, already in the Garden of Eden. And you know what that means? It means that Satan is no longer your bully. He can't boss you around. He can't tell you what to do. You are no longer under his control. He can't manipulate you by threatening to tell God all your dirty little secrets. God already knows all your dirty little secrets, and he's forgiven every one of them, for Christ's sake. That means, Satan's got nothing on you anymore. Every time Satan tries to hang sins in around your neck, you can say, "Sorry, Satan, that one's forgiven, blotted out by the blood of Jesus. Every time Satan tries to dangle a temptation before your eyes, you can say, "Sorry Satan, I don't need that. I don't even want that. I've got Jesus. And he's giving me everything I want, and everything I truly need. In him, I've

discovered what true freedom really is.

If you think about it, in our world, there are a lot of people who are still being bullied. While we may not be able to prevent bullying from taking place in our classrooms and social channels, we can provide people with a perfect antidote for bullying. And the antidote is Jesus. Jesus once said, *“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. But if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* (John 8:34,36) When you realize that the brutality that Jesus endured at the hands of his enemies was all so that you could be free from the control of Satan, it equips you for life in the real world. It gives you the ability to handle the little digs that people throw out of you, the feelings of inferiority that sometimes haunt you or the nagging suspicion that you're not good enough or that you just don't belong, or even the temptation to put other people down so you feel better about yourself. In each one of these situations, you can go back to the cross and say, “Wait a minute. Jesus spilled his blood for me. Jesus made me right in God's eyes. If God says I'm alright, what does it matter what other people think? What does it matter what even I feel? What counts is what God says, yes, what God has done for us, in Christ.” Jesus endured bitter brutality at the hands of men also that we might enjoy real peace and healing and joy in the hands of God, hands which still bear the marks of the nail to prove his love for sinners like us. And for that we say, Thank you, Jesus! Amen.