

Matthew 27:27-31

²⁷Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort of soldiers around him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. ²⁹They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand, knelt in front of him, and mocked him by saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰They spit on him, took the staff, and hit him repeatedly on his head.

³¹After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Hands of Brutality (Soldiers)

I.

It was during his fifth grade year that his parents began to notice a change in personality in their son. He had been such a happy kid in the past. The seemingly permanent smile and the bounce in his step gave way to sullenness. He grew distant.

His parents tried to take an interest and get him to talk about what was bothering him, but he wouldn't. Finally, months later, he admitted that he was being bullied by a group of students in school.

It isn't just a problem in schools, is it? Bullying happens between spouses and in the workplace—even among groups of people you see as your friends. The government's website on bullying, www.stopbullying.gov, identifies three types of bullying. Verbal bullying is described as saying or writing mean things. Social bullying involves hurting someone's reputation or relationships. Leaving someone out of a group is one example; telling someone not to be friends with another person is another. Physical bullying involves hurting a person's body or possessions.

II.

If the website's description is accurate, Jesus was a victim of all three types of bullying while he was on earth. His enemies, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, routinely bullied him verbally. They were always trying to trip him up with their loaded questions. As for social bullying, the Jewish leaders constantly discouraged people from following Jesus. They spread rumors about him and tried to embarrass him publicly.

Throughout his ministry Jesus had been bullied verbally and socially, but his enemies had carefully avoided doing him any physical harm. Beginning Maundy Thursday evening, the bullying escalated in intensity. Physical violence became a part of things. Tonight we join in progress the scenes that show Hands of Brutality.

III.

Brutality had actually begun at the kangaroo court of the Jewish leaders, as we saw last week. At their illegal meeting, the Jews had tried to manufacture evidence to sentence Jesus to death. They couldn't make anything stick. They stopped trying to pin blame on him and just mocked him mercilessly. Last week we watched them mock Jesus, spit in his face, blindfold him and hit him from all sides, demanding that he identify who it was that had hit him.

Now Jesus had been sent him on to Pontius Pilate. Pilate interviewed Jesus and was determined to set him free. Pilate, however, was a politician first. His humanitarian side

came far down the list. The angry mob of Jews screaming that Jesus ought to be crucified pressured Pilate into taking action. Perhaps if Jesus were brutalized in the Roman way, the blind rage of the Jews could be satisfied. Then, Pilate thought, he might be able to release an innocent man.

“Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort of soldiers around him” (Matthew 27:27, EHV). If you are looking at the reading in the EHV pew Bible, you will notice a footnote by the word “cohort.” The footnote tells us the definition of a cohort: about 600 soldiers. 600? Pilate handed Jesus over to 600 bullies and told them to do their worst.

For a Roman soldier, being stationed in Judea was like being sent to the end of the world. Not only was there nothing for them to do there, it was a pain to put up with the Jews. The constant religious infighting among the Jewish factions was enough to make a soldier want to quit. They had to get their entertainment somehow. Jesus served that purpose.

John tells us something not in our account from Matthew: “Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged” (John 19:1, EHV). Flogging was done with a lead-tipped whip called a flagrum. It was designed to break open the skin, cause massive bleeding and internal injury, and weaken the person so he couldn’t resist any further punishment. So violent was this kind of beating that the Jews limited the number of lashes a person could receive.

Jesus, however, was in the hands of the Romans now. They had no such limit. Ironically, this treatment was so tortuous that many considered it to be an act of mercy. You were so weakened by the beatings that you would die more quickly when crucified.

After his beating: “They... put a scarlet robe on him. ²⁹They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand, knelt in front of him, and mocked him by saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ ³⁰They spit on him, took the staff, and hit him repeatedly on his head” (Matthew 27:28-30, EHV). After his brutal whipping, the soldiers turned to ridicule. The Jew’s whole case against Jesus revolved around his claim to be a king. Playing to an approving Jewish mob, the Roman soldiers threw a scarlet robe on him. They twisted together a bramble of thorns and pressed it into his skull as if it were a crown. They placed a stick of some kind into his weakened hands and knelt mockingly in front of him. Just as happened at the hands of Caiaphas, the group of soldiers took turns spitting on him and beating him over the head again and again.

With every spray of spit, with every blow, with every taunt and jeer, Jesus fulfilled God’s Word: “I submitted my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from disgrace and from spit” (Isaiah 50:6, EHV).

How does one handle a bully? Movies and TV shows reinforce what many fathers and mothers have often said: fight back. Punch the bully in the mouth! Not Jesus. He had told his followers to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44); he told them to do to others what you would like to have *them* do to you (Matthew 7:12).

Jesus let himself be brutalized. He offered his back. He didn’t object to his oppressors. Why? Why didn’t he stand up for himself and punch those bullies in the mouth? Clearly he had the power—he gave us a glimpse of that when the soldiers came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He did it for you. Jesus let himself be treated in this way because he knew this was the

cup of suffering he had asked God to take away. But God *wouldn't* take it away. Jesus had to drink every last drop of that cup. "It was the LORD's will to crush him and to allow him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10, EHV).

Christ was brutalized for you as your perfect substitute. If Jesus hadn't endured this shame, if he had avoided the indignity, if he had retreated from the cross or refused to drink even a drop of the suffering—then there is no forgiveness of sins, and God's wrath toward you is still undiminished. God's wrath is far more severe than any Roman soldier's.

IV.

How much Christ suffered for you! How much he loved you! Look at how thoroughly he was brutalized. *That's* how thoroughly you are forgiven.

John Chrysostom, a theologian from early on in the era of the Christian Church, said this:

Not only one of the Lord's members, but his entire body had to suffer the most dreadful pains. His head was wounded by the crown of thorns, by the blows of the fists, and by the reed; his face endured spittle and smiting; his entire body was scourged, stripped, and arrayed in a robe of shame; his hands held the reed; later, his tongue had to taste vinegar and gall. Because sin dwells and is active in all our members, therefore Christ desired to suffer for our sins in all his members.

Jesus' whole body had to suffer at the hands of brutality. Sin permeates our being; pain permeated Jesus' being to cleanse our sins.

When you are the victim of bullying, you feel alone and powerless. You feel as though you have to obey the bully. Sin is a bully. It tries to coerce us into crimes against the Commandments. The devil is a bully. Satan browbeats us into bad behavior.

Our brother Jesus was bullied in our place and was brutalized for all of us. We belong to Christ. Now our spiritual bullies can't demand our lunch money; they have no say in our morality.

Freedom from sin and Satan is reason enough to rejoice! But as we join Jesus in his gracious rule we begin to see what liberty looks like. Peter says: "Therefore, because Christ suffered in flesh, arm yourselves with the same mindset, because the one who has suffered in flesh is done with sin. ²Do this so that you no longer live the rest of your time in the flesh for human desires but for God's will" (1 Peter 4:1-2, EHV). Because Jesus made peace with us through the brutal suffering in his body, in him we are able to live peaceably with others.

So many people are still living without Christ. They're still being bullied by sin and Satan. They feel alone and powerless as the bullies dictate their lives. How much better it is to have God as your Father! He raises happy kids. Our brother, Jesus, suffered under the soldiers' hands of brutality. As a result, we will never have to suffer God's wrath. As happy kids in God's family, we rejoice to bring our brother's peace to people who are still being bullied. Amen.