

The Scourging

Written by The Light

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:4, 5). "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him." —John 19:1

Just three words...the mind absorbs them in a second, and passes to the next line. The Bible gives no further explanation, no parenthetical statement or footnote explaining what these words mean. Most of us have read over the passage for years without really contemplating that word..

.scourged.

It was somehow a part of the crucifixion. Maybe we heard a preacher say it was some sort of a whipping. But it was so much more.

The Roman Governor Pilate knew the Jews delivered Jesus out of envy, that He had committed no real crime, certainly not one worthy of death (Matt. 27:18, Luke 23:15). But this shrewd politician also knew something had to be done. These folks were too worked up to go home without any action, so he decided a scourging might satisfy their lust for vengeance (John 19:1, cf. 19:5).

But he had misjudged. These were not civilized people by modern standards. An "examination by scourging" (Acts 22:24, 29) was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution. This brutal flogging was called the "little death" preceding the "big death" (crucifixion). Only women, Roman senators, and soldiers (except deserters) were exempt. History tells us that a criminal was flogged either by two soldiers (lictors) or by one who alternated positions. Under Hebrew law a penalty was limited to forty strokes, so they normally stopped at thirty-nine in case they mis-counted (Deut. 25:3). The Romans imposed no such limitation. A scourging's severity depended entirely on the lictor's disposition. The only rule for the lictor who scourged a man about to be crucified was that he was to expire on the cross—not at the stake. Thus he tried to take his victim to the very verge of death, without crossing the threshold.

The Lictor's Tools

The scourging post was usually about two feet high. A

criminal's

wrists were strapped to an iron ring that projected from two sides near the top. Sometimes the victim's arms were stretched instead above his head and fastened to a beam. The usual instrument was a short-handled whip (flagrum, flagellum) with several single or braided thongs of variable lengths, on which sharp pieces of sheep bone, or metal were tied at intervals. Sometimes the whip was made instead of several thin, iron chains which ended in small weights.

Clothing was stripped so the prisoner stood naked, or at the most with a loin-cloth. (This may be the thrust of Hebrews

12:2.

Jesus, "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the

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shame...")

The man's wrists were tightly fixed to the iron rings. He was stretched, facing downward, with his feet pointed away from the post (or in the case of the beam, he was hoisted vertically). In both cases, the shoulder blades were thus positioned to provide little protection for the underlying flesh. The tension of awaiting the first blow was cruel. The body was rigid. The muscles knotted in tormenting cramps. Color drained from the cheeks. Lips were drawn tight against the teeth.

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Then it came...the rush of the whip as it parted the air, and the horrible sound as it made contact with flesh, the terrible burning sensation and the first trickle of blood. And then, the whistle of the whip as it came again...and again, and again...more rapidly, blow after blow. The unbearable agony of the naked back, the neck, and sometimes the face and chest as the whip was allowed to encircle the body, striking the buttocks and legs—all, repeatedly struck. The particularly cruel would sometimes then turn the victim on his back for access to unspeakably vicious acts of scourging.

At first, the whipping caused deep contusions (bruising). Then, as the lictor continued his well-practiced procedure, the thongs, sheep bones, chains, and weights cut into the skin, subcutaneous tissue, and even muscle. The lacerations often tore into the underlying skeletal muscles and produced quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. As one writer expressed it, "They beat

Him

until His shoulder blades looked like two whitecaps on an ocean of blood." The victim lost all consciousness of anything other than the blinding, burning pain as the cruel whip whistled and cut, whistled and cut. A scourging was the literal equivalent of being flayed alive. It hurt so much that men were known to bite their tongues in two during the beatings.

But

It Was Not the

End

After what seemed like an eternity to the victim and those who loved Him, His limp body was finally taken from the post or beam. As was the custom, His wounds were washed but not otherwise medicated. The pain, the blood loss caused by scourging generally led to circulator shock. And of Jesus, all after he had gone without food, water, and sleep for fifteen to thirty hours, hours in which he had been physically and mentally abused throughout the night.

Imagine, as Jesus' clothes were placed on his lacerated back, how the blood must have soaked into the garment from the open wounds. As the blood began to clot, the cloth would become literally glued to the lacerations, stiff and dry.

The Roman soldiers, amused that this weakened man had claimed to be a king, began to mock Him. One of them brought forth a purple robe, and about the time His bleeding had stopped,

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they ripped His clothes from where his blood had glued them to his wounds, opening them again with excruciating pain. There was no mercy in their sport.

Another ran out to a thorn bush and gathered some prickly spines to form a tight, thorny circle, and then with cruel hilarity, forced the "crown" roughly onto Jesus' tender scalp, with sharp thorns piercing the skin in dozens of places. Another took a reed, thrust it into his hand, and then all mockingly bowed before him in this pitiful state, saying "Hail! King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed from his hand and smote him on the head, driving the thorns in more deeply. What shame and disgrace, as Jesus' sinless blood ran down His face, into His eyes and mouth, dripping onto His garment.

After the soldiers had satisfied their cruelty, they took Him back to the Governor. Picture, if you can, our pitiful Saviour, in the blood stained robe, the crown of thorns yet on his brow, hardly able to carry himself, being led out by Pilate for these sick people to see. Pilate said simply, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5). He must have thought that surely this would satisfy their hatred. Surely with the pitiful sight before them they would say, "Enough! It is enough! Release him." But he underestimated their blind and inhumane hatred. They were now animals; they wanted more. They wanted him to die.

Why?

Why did Jesus go through this? He didn't have to. "No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself he once said. He could have called myriads of angels for his defense and shield. He could have gone back to heaven in a chariot of fire. Why, then, all this? Because he loved us. Because he wanted to save us. Because "God so loved he world that he gave his only begotten son..." That is why.

Are you saved? Do you not care about this sacrifice, about his beating, about his crucifixion? Have you responded to his "come unto me"? If not, if you don't care, if you've read **this** account without deep respect, then, so far as you are concerned, he went through all this for nothing. Will you admit that?... that you do not care?

Jesus still invites, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mk. 16:16). "And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9). He still pleads, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mat. 11:28).