

Bullying is such a widespread and real problem that our government has set up a website, www.stopbullying.gov. It happens in our classrooms, it happens between spouses in our homes, in the workplace, on the subway. The site describes bullying as a pattern of behavior that is used to leverage power or control over another. It identifies three types of bullying. Verbal bullying involves name calling and threats of violence. Social bullying happens when a person is deliberately excluded or ostracized from a group, or others are encouraged not to befriend someone. Physical bullying occurs when property is damaged as a threat of further violence, or when you actually lay your hands on someone else by pushing, kicking, tripping, or using your fists to fight.

Working with the website's description, we'd have to admit that Jesus was the victim of all three types of bullying during his time on earth. His enemies, primarily religious enemies like the Pharisees and Sadducees, routinely engaged in patterns of verbal bullying. Their regular attempts to catch Jesus with a "gotcha" question is just one example. There was also the social bullying. Jewish leaders discouraged people from following Jesus, spread rumors about him, and tried to embarrass him publicly. After reading Matthew's words, Jesus' physical bullying is unmistakable. What happened at the Praetorium goes way beyond bullying to utter contempt and outright assault. Tonight, we see Jesus suffer the soldiers' . . .

Hands of Brutality

Jesus was now in the custody of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent. He knew that the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over out of jealousy. In fact, as Pilate interviewed Jesus, the governor was determined to set Jesus free. But Pilate was a politician first and a humanitarian second. The angry mob of Jews screaming that Jesus be crucified pressured Pilate into taking action. Perhaps if Jesus were brutalized the Roman way, the Jews' blind rage would be placated, and

Pilate could release an innocent man. Jesus was handed over to the whole company of Roman soldiers—an estimated 600 men—to do their worst.

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole cohort^[a] of soldiers around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. ²⁹ They 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!" ³⁰ They spit on him, took the staff, and hit him repeatedly on his head.

You have to understand, for a Roman soldier, being stationed in Judea was like being sent to the end of the world. There was nothing to do. Putting up with Jewish rebellion was a pain. Their constant religious infighting was enough to make a soldier quit. They had to get their entertainment somehow. They had to get out their frustrations somehow. Or so they felt. Jesus was the handy excuse.

The first thing the soldiers did was to whip Jesus' bare back. This lead-tipped whip was called a flagrum, and 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. This scourging was so violent that the Jews limited the number of lashes a person could receive. And if you were a Roman citizen, it wasn't allowed at all. But Jesus was in the hands of brutality now, and there was no such limit.

After his brutal whipping, the soldiers turned to ridicule. The Jews' whole case against Jesus revolved around his claim to be a king. Playing to an approving Jewish crowd, the Romans threw a scarlet robe on him—probably a soldier's coat. They twisted together a bramble of thorns and pressed it into his skull as though it were a crown. They placed a stick of some kind into his weakened hands, and "*they knelt down before him and mocked him. 'Hail, king of the Jews'*" (v. 29). The company of

soldiers took turns spitting on him and beating him over the head again and again.

Some would argue, of course, that bullies are usually just cowards. The way to handle a bully is to fight back. Punch the bully in the mouth! Not Jesus. The same god-man who taught his followers to ***turn...the other [cheek]*** (Mt 5:39), ***love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*** (Mt 5:44), and ***do for others what you would have them do for you*** (Mt 7:12) is the god-man practicing exactly what he had preached. Indeed, by doing so, he did more than practice his own preaching; he fulfilled prophecy. As Isaiah foretold, ***“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”*** (Isa 53:7). With every slash of the flagrum, with every blow of the staff, with every taunt and jeer, Jesus fulfilled God’s Word. Again from 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”*** (Isa 50:6).

Yes, Jesus *let* himself be brutalized as he *offered* his back to them. He *didn’t object* to his oppressors’ taunts and jeers, because he *was* the King of the Jews. In fact he’s King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16), his name is above every name and to him every knee will bow (Php 2:9,10). He willingly suffered those hands of brutality, even to the point of death, because that is what needed to happen. He did it for you and me according to God’s plan. Yet again from Isaiah, ***“It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer”*** (Isa 53:10). Yes, Christ was brutalized for you and me as our 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 suffering...***without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.*** (Hebrews 9:22)

An ancient church father who lived in the days just after the Nicene Creed was penned, John Chrysostom, head of the church in Constantinople, explains why Christ’s whole body had to suffer at the hands of brutality.

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 shape; 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.

Yes, because of Jesus, we are no longer bullied by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. No, we can rejoice with the Apostle Paul ***“Sin shall no longer be [our] master, because [we] are not under the law, but under grace”*** (Ro 6:14). And as we live under the rule of our gracious King Jesus, we begin to see what true liberty looks like. Peter describes it, ***“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God”*** (1 Pe 4:1,2). Taking on Jesus’ attitude enables us to ***turn...the other [cheek]*** (Mt 5:39), ***love [our] enemies and pray for those who persecute [us]*** (Mt 5:44), and ***do for others what [we] would have them do for [us]***. (Mt 7:12) Yes, because of Jesus, ***the God of hope [will] fill you with complete joy and peace as you continue to believe, so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*** (Ro 15:13) not just in your own life, but overflowing with grace in the lives of others around you. God grant it. Amen.

ⁱ Adapted from *Hands of the Passion* Lenten resource for 2021. © 2020 Northwestern Publishing House.

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