

Time of Grace Ministry
Watch with Me: Watch Me Suffer
March 25, 2012
Mark 15:10-20

Have you ever gone through a period of intense physical suffering in your life?

The twenty-first century really got off to a hard start, didn't it? Right away in the year 2000 was the bursting of the dot.com economic bubble, and our whole economy took a step backwards. And then in 2001, of course, the dreaded September 11th attacks came, and it basically traumatized America. It was an act of terror, and indeed our country was terrorized. And this whole decade has been a hard one in many, many ways.

And strangely enough, Americans have learned a lot more about the world probably than they wish they knew. They had to discover different peoples, different languages and religions, and different places that they had never known about before, like Guantanamo, for instance, or the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. And the reason why this is on people's minds is that those were examples of the difficulties in fighting a new kind of warfare. It never ceases to amaze military strategists and military historians that it seems there are always new ways to fight wars. It doesn't matter how much you've studied, how many history books you've read, or how much of an expert you are on the history of warfare – things always seem to want to change.

And the new kind of warfare that the United States has been involved in as a response to the September 11th attacks is sometimes called "asymmetrical warfare." Our men and women in uniform now face enemies that usually are not uniformed. They're not regulars, as it is; they don't represent a country with a capital, with a sitting government that you can talk to. There's nobody to surrender to or that we could somehow capture who would then surrender. It's like constant guerilla warfare. In fact, in my own mind, I kind of think it must be what the Italian government and even the American government has been going through for many decades in fighting against organized crime and the mafia, in that they're not uniformed; it's asymmetrical, as they call it.

And we've learned a lot more about these places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo than we really wished we'd have known. What do you do when you capture one of these asymmetrical-like soldiers? They're not in uniform; there's no command structure that they report to; they're not civilians – what do you do with them? And unfortunately, one of the things that happened in Abu Ghraib was torture. And that's what I would like to talk to you about today – that very concept of torture.

What do you do with people you capture who don't seem to have a country? Or who are not accountable to any government agency? Who don't follow the rules of the Geneva Convention? So our military did the best they could – they parked them in military prisons, waiting for the politicians to figure out what to do with them from there. This isn't regular warfare where they're treated like prisoners of war, because they're not in uniform; they don't follow the usual rules of war. But letting the police and courts handle this isn't the right solution either. So there they sit in prisons like Guantanamo, which, believe it or not, the United States is still hanging

onto the tip of Cuba from long ago; and so there's a bunch of these difficult-to-handle detainees there. And then you've heard about the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, where unfortunately, various kinds of atrocities took place that made our country look very bad.

And that has plunged our country into a discussion of torture. And over the last ten years our top attorneys in this country have struggled with, "What is torture? Have we been torturing people?" And terrible accusations have gone flying out, making the United States look pretty bad. The detainees (the Muslim extremist detainees – that's as good a term as any, I guess, who can figure out for who were sitting in that prison in Cuba). They will say that, "The Americans have treated us horribly. They've used sleep deprivation and blasting rock music at us for hours at a time." Some of you might not find that exactly torturous. In fact, that sounds to me a lot like my life in college actually. But they didn't like it because it wasn't part of their culture; they hated it.

Abu Ghraib prison was even worse. There, in the haste, it was not adequately managed, and things like using nakedness as a form of intimidation to try to break peoples' spirits – it might not be the first thing you think of when you think of torture, but what if it was you? It's very hard to feel like you're anybody when you're naked and your captors have all their clothes on. You feel small, helpless, and weak, and they were pushed around. The notorious water-boarding took place in those years, where you strap someone onto a board, tip them upside down (or at least, head downward), and then you trickle water into their face and into their nostrils to give the sensation of drowning, and you panic people. And as tough as people are, they try to hold out, but that messes with your mind. And we don't do that anymore – I'm glad we don't. Anything you do to a combatant of any kind could conceivably then morally be done to U.S. troops if they should be captured. And I don't think we should ever treat any captured opponents in any way that we would not expect our own uniformed men and women to be treated if they were captured.

But still, sleep deprivation, nakedness, and even dribbling water into somebody's nostrils – what we now call horrible torture today – is pretty much the minor leagues. That's like Single-A ball, or at best Double-A ball. I want to tell you a story about real torture, and it comes to us from the Gospel of St. Mark. And it's what your Savior had to go through in order to buy you back so that you could live with him, instead of living in something that would make Abu Ghraib look like a resort. And it's in the Gospel of St. Mark 15, and I invite you to look that up with me in your Bible.

This is the fourth in the series of Bible studies that I've been doing with you called, "Watch With Me." Jesus wants you to pay attention to the way in which he spent the last hours of his life. "Watch with me! Watch me serve. I want you to watch what drives me. It's not about me; it's about you. I came to serve you." And kneeling and washing the disciples' feet gave them a visual demo of what that was all about. "Watch me surrender," he said. "I'm willingly going to lay down my divine power and allow my hands to be bound, and taken away."

Last week you and I sat in on that illegal Jewish tribunal, the Sanhedrin, and watched him speak; where he held his silence for most of the evening, but then confessed his identity and his mission and gave a heads-up that soon the tables would be turned and he would be the judge, and all within earshot were going to sit in *his* court. Today, I invite you to do the difficult thing, "Watch Me Suffer."

This is his court hearing at the federal level. The Sanhedrin was like state or county level; they lacked authority to carry out capital punishment. And in order fully to brand Jesus as a menace to society, his adversaries first needed to embarrass him in the religious court, and now they're going to try to get him convicted as a criminal – as a threat to society, too dangerous to live in what was essentially a federal court. And somehow they managed to convene Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea and Samaria, and he was able to pull his people together and have a hearing really early in the morning; it's now like 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning. And somehow he responded to the threat – there was a great big crowd, an ugly crowd, and probably his assistants said, “You better get into the Praetorium, Pilate – Mr. Governor – because there's trouble brewing and you might have to keep a riot down.”

Jerusalem, at Passover time, was swollen with people. It's like New Orleans during Mardi Gras; its population exploded to two, or three, or four times its normal size. So the city's bulging with people, and when mobs get together there's no telling what could happen. So Pilate gave a little bit of a listen, and he figured out right away: “This man's pathetic. He's done nothing wrong. He's helpless; he's harmless. Why are you doing this? I find no fault in him.” But he made a calculation that because this wasn't a (Roman) citizen he didn't have any civil rights that needed to be respected, and so his life was disposable in order to keep the peace. And so Pilate betrayed his own proud legal system. Roman law is one of their greatest legacies to the world; it's one of the things of which they were most proud. In fact, Roman law serves as the constitutional basis upon which a great deal of American law is based. But he (Pilate) betrayed it all and condemned an innocent man just out of political expediency.

So here was Pontius Pilate's dilemma: Here he's the governor of this part of the Roman Empire, representing Imperial Rome – proud Rome – on its eastern edges; the eastern part of the Empire and the eastern Mediterranean. He was the representative of a legal system that was so famous and so respected that it became the foundation for legal systems for all of western civilization. And yet, he knew that what that crowd was demanding was an injustice. He had concluded that Jesus was not guilty of death and yet, that mob outside was clamoring for the death penalty of crucifixion to be imposed.

So Pilate did what top administrators often do – he tried going sideways. And he had three different thoughts or strategies to avoid and evade making a decision that he knew was wrong. The first thing he did was to try to slide him off on his partner governor. Pilate was the governor only of Samaria and Judea – the middle and southern part of the land of Israel. Up north in Galilee, where Jesus actually was from in Nazareth, that was governed by a governor – although he was called a king by the name of Herod – the Roman emperor allowed him to use the title “king” even though he had no more power than Pontius Pilate. And this Herod happened to be in town, in Jerusalem, going through the motions of celebrating the Passover Feast. So Pilate thought, “Well, let's slide him over into his jurisdiction. He's a Nazarene, after all; he's a Galilean; let Herod have him.” But Jesus wouldn't talk at all, he just listened. And after a gratifying but unsatisfying interview, Herod was too smart to do anything with that hot potato and he just shoved him right back at Pilate; and so that hot potato was right back in Pilate's lap.

The second thing that occurred to Pontius Pilate to do was to try to trade prisoners, and he offered this crowd the worst criminal that was currently in his prisons, sort of the Charles

Manson of his day; a violent, angry man named Barabbas. And to his great surprise, the people vastly preferred to have Barabbas loose on the streets, and they wanted Jesus kept in custody and executed. “Give us Barabbas,” they said. “We’d rather have this Charles Manson type, this violent criminal, on our streets.”

The third thing that Pilate tried was to have Jesus publicly flogged and scourged – drawing blood – hoping that that would assuage their blood lust. But it only did what blood in the water does to sharks – it only made them get angrier and more excited. They still demanded crucifixion. The sharks just get crazier with a little bit of blood, and so he finally gave the order, “All right, have at it.” But here is what led up to his judicial decision, to pronounce capital punishment on a man he knew was innocent.

“Pilate knew it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.” (I’m at verse ten). “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked. ‘Crucify him!’ they shouted. ‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged...” sometimes called a scourging. That’s torture. This isn’t playing hours of loud rock music, or sleep deprivation. This is a leather handle with multiple leather lashes coming out of the end of it, and the tip of each one is embedded in a little piece of bone or glass or metal, sharp enough to guarantee that the skin will be broken. In fact, it pretty much guarantees after thirty-nine of those that you won’t have much of any – if any – skin left on your back when they’re done with you. And it was done in public, as a public demonstration of what will happen to any enemy of the state who does what that person did.

And so jaded were the people of that time that they had an audience for the scourging of Jesus. This is torture! After he was a bloody mess, “The soldiers led him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium)...” and Pilate let them have a little fun with their pathetic prisoner. He gathered “together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, (wove) a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they worshipped him. 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.”

I say this stuff to you not just to arouse a little sense of pity at a clearly unjust verdict, or to invite you to feel sorry for someone who really was tortured. But this event that you see in your mind’s eye is a critically important piece of your personal rescue from a fate that awaited you. You and I don’t like to hear this story; you and I don’t like to have to visualize it. We look away, like the “ick factor” is too high, isn’t it? It’s gross. It’s uncomfortable. It makes me so uncomfortable I don’t like to think about it. The interpretation of what you just heard ironically was spoken seven hundred years before it happened. Listen to these insights from Isaiah 53. We must watch; and the fact that we don’t want to doesn’t mean we shouldn’t. We must watch Jesus suffer.

Isaiah wrote in chapter 53: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.” He wasn’t a beautiful Savior at that moment – him (Jesus) notwithstanding. There was no beauty in what you saw. Wretched misery. “Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their

faces...” – just what you and I want to do is to look away, hide our faces, skip over that part; the ugly part, the ick part. “He was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

First of all, it’s gross. Secondly, do you know what makes us so antsy? Because we know that should have been us. Sin is that bad. You’re looking at what hell is like; physical torment as a punishment for evil thinking, talking and living. This is how angry God is at the way you are at birth. This is what is going to befall all who have joined the rebellion of Satan. That’s what makes this so unsettling; we don’t want to have to admit we’re that bad. Here’s the honest truth – don’t hide your face! Look at it, watch with him; watch him suffer, because that’s the punishment.

But get this – God the Father wasn’t just sort of watching events spinning out of control. He was behind this, accepting that as his decision and action. Listen to what else Isaiah says in chapter 53: “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer.” His Father sent him right into it. His Father’s hand was on that scourging whip also, and laying it on him. His Father was saying, “Give it to him again, harder this time.” And all of the anger at all of the people’s sin in all of the centuries, in all of the countries, in all of the languages, in all of the civilizations – God’s anger and judgment was being poured out with every crack of that whip on his back. Look at it – don’t turn away. Look at it, because that is where the anger of God is going instead of on you. But it should have come upon you. Look at this in awe and shock, but look at it in gratitude. Look at it in compassion. Not only was this horrible for Christ to have to undergo – to take not only the physical pain of it – but also the shame. Not only was blood dripping off his face, but saliva. The spit of his tormentors was dripping off his face. He bore it, but the Father was doing that to his Son. Have you ever imagined how the Father’s heart was being ripped out by doing this to the Son he loved more than anything? But he did it for you and for me.

“He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Watch him suffer, for this is the way in which your salvation was purchased for you. This is how you can have a gift so free, because the debts have all been paid. The torture was immense, as is our sin. And that means that the forgiveness that is freely given to you and to me is immense also. It’s bigger than any amount of sins you have managed to pile up in your lifetime. And he made himself lower than a slave in order that he can give to you and to me the privilege of being his sons and daughters. Don’t look away; don’t hide your face. Look at him and appreciate a Father who loves you that much. Look at him; don’t look away! Don’t hide your face, but realize that your Savior Jesus loves you that much. Amen.

I’d like to pray with you now. Let’s come before our Lord and ask him for his spiritual blessings, and to let him know of our great appreciation for all that he has done for us. As we ponder the concept in our world today of what torture does, and what actually is torture – to bring pain and suffering into a human being – think of what our Lord Jesus had to go through; something far worse than any of the torture that we’ve heard about in our world today.

“Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you for what you were willing to do. We praise and are in awe of your bravery and your courage. You stuck it out and did not bend. You bore all that suffering, and now by your wounds we are healed. Thank you for buying us forgiveness of our sins at such a frightful cost to you. We love you, Lord Jesus, and it’s in your name we pray. Amen.”

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mark Jeske, reminding you that every day is a time of God's grace for you.



Grace Notes

Guides for Personal Bible Study

Watch With Me 4: Watch Me Suffer

Mark 15:12-20: And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

Points to Ponder

- Pilate recognized quickly that Jesus was completely innocent of any capital crime. How did he himself protest the charges?
- Pilate attempted three tactics to avoid pronouncing the death penalty. What were they?
- Why would Pilate allow his soldiers to abuse Jesus as they did before the sentence was carried out?
- **Read Isaiah chapter 53.** Whose decision and power and condemnation were really behind Pilate’s?
- What does Jesus’ suffering mean for you?

The Bottom Line

Jesus suffered unjust torture in order for us to receive salvation. It was all part of God’s plan, for the forgiveness of our sins. In Jesus’ suffering we witness the tremendous love he and the Father have for us.

You can dig deeper into your Bible by reading more about these truths from the lesson:

- Suffered for You! Isaiah 53:5; Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 10:10; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2
- God’s Great Love! Psalm 103:11; John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Romans 8:37-39; 1 John 4:9-12
- Give Thanks! Isaiah 25:9; Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 4:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 4:13