

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

Matthew 27:27-30; Mark 15:16-19; John 19:2-3

About 7:30 am on Friday morning, the fifteenth of Nisan

DIG: Why were the soldiers so cruel in this case? Why do you think all of them came out to watch the Nazarene being flogged? What physical effects were starting to become evident? What did the crown of thorns represent? What prophecy did the soldiers unwittingly fulfill?

REFLECT: Have you ever done something you thought would please God but turned out to have just the opposite effect? Messiah had been beaten to a pulp and mocked. When He gave Himself up in the garden of Gethsemane, He knew this would happen. Humanly speaking, do you think He experienced fear, abandonment, even desperation? Why do you think His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground in the Garden (Luke 22:44)? Which do you think was worse, the physical pain or emotional pain? Why?

The tribune took Jesus by the arm and led Him into an adjoining enclosed courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard were three small stone pillars, each about three feet tall. Each one had embedded in it two big iron rings. After being stripping Yeshua, He was taken to the nearest post and pulled down so that both wrists were tied to a ring, making Him unable to move. Stripped naked, His back, buttocks and legs were exposed.¹⁵⁸⁰

Roman flogging was called *the halfway death* because it was supposed to stop this side of death. The dreaded *verberatio* always preceded the crucifixion. Two Roman soldiers stood behind Him, one on each side. Each held a wooden handled whip called a *flagrum*, from which there hung three strips of leather, each about three feet long. Knotted leather thongs caused the least damage, while metal weights braided into the straps caused deep contusions and even rib fracture. Some flagrum braided small shards of sheep bone into the straps, which tore the victim's flesh with each lash. Victims who didn't die immediately of shock often succumbed to infection later.¹⁵⁸¹ A third soldier stood by holding an abacus so he might keep track of the number of blows inflicted. A fourth soldier was responsible for tying and chaining the victim to the flogging pole. He stood ready to replace any soldier who tired of his duty and watched over all of them was the supervisor.

So after being manacled and stripped, it began. The Son of God felt the lash. Unlike a woman giving birth, there was no time to rest between contractions. The instant one soldier pulled back his whip - the other struck with full force. The leather strips with the braided

weights or sheep bones would cut into and beneath the skin. Then, as **the flogging** continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering muscles and bleeding flesh. Many times bones were exposed. It would not take more than three minutes. Pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock.

Quoting **Isaiah**, **Peter** wrote: **By His wounds [or stripes NKJV] you have been healed (First Peter 2:24)**. This gives us a vivid picture of how our **Lord's** back looked after **flogging**. The word translated **wounds** or **strips** is singular in the Greek. It refers to a bloody disfiguration trickling with blood that came as a result of **the flogging**. **Yeshua's** back was so lacerated by the *verberatio* that it was one mass of open, raw, quivering flesh trickling with blood, not a series of **wounds** or **stripes**.¹⁵⁸²

The severity of **the flogging**, however, depended on the disposition of **the soldiers** and was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse. The amount of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross. The length of survival on the cross generally ranged from three or four hours, to three or four days depending on the severity of **the flogging**. Afterwards, the soldiers often taunted their victim.¹⁵⁸³ Many died from **the flogging** itself, never living to be crucified.

After **the flogging**, **Jesus** was unchained and helped to **His** feet and got **him** dressed. The severity of **the flogging**, with its intense pain and appreciable blood loss, most likely left **Him** in a pre-shock state. The lash marks extend from **Messiah's** back, down to **His** calves. One cannot imagine carrying a heavy wooden cross on top of the wounds that **He** suffered. **The Roman soldiers** had clearly done **their** job. Striking with surgical precision, **they** had almost beaten **the Lord** to death. But **the governor** had made it crystal clear that **they** were not to kill **Him**. That would be left for another team of Roman executioners.

Although **the soldiers of the governor** were under **Pilate's** orders have **Yeshua flogged**, **they** exhibited **their** own wickedness by far exceeding what basic duty required. **The soldiers** probably shared **the procurators'** hatred of Jews and took this opportunity to vent their anger on a Jew condemned by fellow Jews. Although in an extreme way, **they** expressed the natural wickedness of every human heart that is ignorant of **ADONAI**.

The tribune ordered a **soldier** to help **Jesus** stand. **He** could not remain standing without two hands under **His** arms. **Yeshua** was held in this position until **He** felt a slight return to strength. Then **He** was permitted to sit on the stone column. Little by little, **His** entire body began to throb with pain. It began as a pulsing thing, dull and debilitating, and it continued to build until **His** entire body screamed with agony.

No one felt pity for Him. To the **soldiers'** way of thinking, any man who permitted himself to get into this position was either stupid or corrupt. And considering how **they** had been treated by the Jews, **they** would not have felt pity even if **they** had understood the emotion. Just as the high priest sincerely felt that the Great Sanhedrin was striking a blow for **ADONAI** in plotting against **Jesus**, so too these **soldiers** were certain that, in beating **Him** half to death, **they** were performing a routine duty.

The Roman **soldiers** were amused that this weakened **man** had claimed to be a **king**, so they would dress **Jesus** like a **king . . . a comic king**. It would be in the same manner as Herod's joke, but exaggerated. As **they** prepared, the **victim** sat, thin and bearded and subject to shivering, which started spasms and shook **His** whole body and rattled **His** teeth. **He** looked up into the sun and **His** face was a suffering mask.

Then the **governor's soldiers** had taken **Jesus** into an enclosed courtyard of the **praetorium**. Once inside **they** summoned the **whole Roman cohort** and **gathered around** the perimeter to watch in amusement. Normally, a **cohort** was 500 **soldiers**, but **Matthew** may not be using the term in its technical sense.¹⁵⁸⁴ The Greek word *speira* often means **cohort**, but it can also signify the Roman *manipulus*, the smallest tactical unit within the Roman army and roughly one-third that number. So this may have been a *manipulus* of about 200 **soldiers** that had accompanied the Roman **governor** to Jerusalem from Caesarea (**Matthew 27:27; Mark 15:16**). However, whatever the number, it was quite the show for the bored **soldiers**.

After the brutal torture of the **flogging** **Jesus** would have been in no state to resist even if **He** had wished. **They stripped Him** again, and to further amuse **themselves**, **they put their own purple robe** (the color of kings) on **Him**. **Then the soldiers twisted together their own crown of thorns and set it on His head** (**Mt 27:28; Mk 15:17; Jn 19:2**). That day, the **crown**, which is normally a symbol of royalty and honor, was turned into a tool of mockery and hate. Yet, our **Savior** willingly wore that thorny **crown** for us, bearing our sin and shame. **The One** who deserved the best of all crowns took the worst for us.¹⁵⁸⁵

Little did those **soldiers** realize that the **crown of thorns** pictured **Jesus** bearing the curse of Adam. **Messiah** did, in fact, come to Isra'el and the whole world to be **King** and also to reverse the curse on a fallen world (see my commentary on **Genesis Bg - Cursed is the Ground Because of You, Through Painful Toil You Will Eat of It**). Over and over again the prophets said that one of the main works of **Messiah** would be the restoration of a fallen paradise. As a result, the **crown of thorns** that the mocking **soldiers** gouged into the **head of the Suffering Servant** demonstrated a remarkable spiritual truth and a painful reminder of work of redemption that **He** would ultimately fulfill.

The soldiers stepped back to admire their handiwork. Then they put a staff in His right hand. Then they knelt in front of Him and mocked Him. They began to call out to Him again and again, saying, "Hail (Rejoice), king of the Jews," which paralleled the formal Roman praise, "Ave, Caesar." And they slapped Him in the face (Matthew 27:29; Mark 15:18; John 19:3)! What a tragic figure Jesus presented at that moment. **This was the fourth mockery.** When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges rightly (First Peter 2:23). Through it all, the Lord suffered in silence, knowing that it was all part of His Father's plan of purchasing lost sinners through the shedding of His blood.

Falling on their knees, they mockingly paid homage to Him. But Jesus did not answer, and had not said a word since the flogging began. Then they spit on Him and slapped Him in the face. But the soldiers weren't done yet, as they took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again (Mt 27:30; Mk 15:19; Jn 19:3)! The words again and again reflect the imperfect tense of the Greek verbs. They kept on slapping Yeshua in the face, spitting on Him, and they continually struck Him on the head. It was not unusual for a convicted criminal to actually die from the torture even before reaching the point of death on the cross. Seven hundred years before our Lord's suffering, Isaiah had a vision of Jesus' face after the inhuman treatment of those frenzied soldiers. Isaiah tells us that His face was so disfigured that He was hardly recognizable. There were many who were appalled at Him - His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man His form marred beyond human likeness (Isaiah 52:14). Unwittingly they had fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

The severe flogging, with its intense pain and appreciable blood loss, most probably left the Lamb of God in a pre-shock state. The physical and mental abuse given out by the Romans, as well as the lack of food, water and sleep, also contributed to His generally weakened condition. So even before the actual crucifixion Jesus' physical condition was at least serious and possibly critical.¹⁵⁸⁶ Then they led the prisoner back to Pilate for sentencing.