

A Real Man's Man

The toughest and strongest-willed man who ever lived was indeed paradoxical. He walked the earth 2,000 years ago, and His name was Jesus. In spite of His mental and physical toughness, He spent His adult life teaching others about God's love. He was humble, kind to all, and spoke of God's kingdom after life on this earth. He taught about how we should treat others with love, kindness, and compassion, and the best barometer was simply to treat others the way we want to be treated. He emphasized service to others, humility, forgiveness, and that God's love for us never ends. His teachings gave hope to all – the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden, as well as the wealthy. These lessons were extended to people of all races, creeds, and ethnic backgrounds.

How was Jesus the toughest and strongest-willed person who ever lived? Because of His choice to go through unimaginable pain and torture, without complaint, and to ultimately give His life for billions of people He did not know at the time of His death. To better appreciate the sacrifice Jesus made for us all, we must look in more detail at the methods of torture that were a part of the Roman crucifixion.

The crucifixion process began by stripping the person down in public and tying them to a whipping post. Next they would be scourged with a whip that had several strands at the end. Each of these strands were tied around sharp pieces of bone and metal. As the beating began, the strands would wrap across the victim's body, and the sharp pieces would cut into and grip the flesh. The flogger would then rake the strands across the victim's body, ripping through skin and muscle often exposing bone and cartilage. This was done to create maximum pain and torture and also to force severe bleeding to weaken the victim. The custom of the day was 40 of these lashes, which was designed to bring the victim near death.

After the scourging, a crown of thorns was forced onto Jesus' head, creating further pain and bleeding. In a very weakened state, He was forced to carry His cross through town and up a hill to where He would be hung on the cross. Spikes were driven through His hands and feet, and the cross was then stood upright. It was at this point that the true torture began. Realistically speaking, crucifixion was actually death by suffocation. Because of His arms being stretched apart, His weight bearing down put pressure on His lungs and made it very hard to breathe, especially as fatigue set in. When He would try to stand more upright to make breathing easier, He would feel excruciating pain in His feet and legs because of the angle that His feet were nailed to the cross. It was an ongoing tradeoff between excruciating pain and suffocation. After several hours of trying to breathe, fatigue would set in and breathing would stop. There have been very few punishments throughout history that have inflicted as much torture and misery.

Certainly, there have been others who became martyrs because they gave their lives for a cause in which they adamantly believed. However, what makes the passion of Christ so unique is that at any time through this torturous process He could have ended it, or "tapped out," because it was getting too tough. He was the son of God and could have stopped it all at any point if He would have chosen. Instead, in spite of unimaginable pain and suffering, He chose to see it through to the end!

When I reflect on the love and sacrifice that Jesus made for all of us, I am truly humbled that anyone would love someone like me to that degree! I have always believed that I am a strong-willed person and very loyal to those I love. But at what point in the crucifixion process would I have surrendered, especially knowing that I was enduring immeasurable suffering for billions of people I did not know and who were not even yet born? Would I have withstood the 40 lashes, feeling the flesh being ripped from my bones? After profuse bleeding, would I have had the fortitude to carry the cross up the hill knowing it was leading to my ultimate death? Would I have continued knowing that the people who thrust the

crown of thorns onto my head as they were cursing and spitting on me were the same people I was giving my life for? And finally, how long would I have lasted on the cross, with spikes driven through my hands and feet, struggling for every breath through incomprehensible pain... all the while knowing that I could call on my Heavenly Father at any moment to send down a band of angels to free me from this misery, and perhaps exact out revenge on those inflicting the torture?

Although I pride myself on being strong-willed and tough-minded, I am confident that under these circumstances, if given the choice, I would not have seen it through to the end. **Therein lies the measure of Christ's strength and love for us.** It was by His choice... **He CHOSE to endure the unimaginable because of His love for me... and you!!**

As athletes, each day we get to decide how hard we are going to work and how far we are willing to push ourselves as fatigue and discomfort set in. Likewise, we decide each day what we are willing to sacrifice for the team. How much are we willing to give of ourselves to bring pride and honor to our family and loved ones, our coaches, our teammates, and perhaps most importantly... to God?

When we connect our suffering in athletics to what Jesus experienced on the cross, it is powerful and creates a meaningful perspective. Training in the off-season, running wind sprints at the end of practice, drill work, sweat, fatigue, and the "bumps and bruises" of intense competition become minor challenges! What He did, willingly for all of us, is by far tougher than anything we will ever face in the athletic arena. May God grant us the wisdom and insight to frequently reflect on the love, courage, and sheer mental and physical toughness of Jesus... and to commit ourselves to be more like Him each day!

"When a man has no strength, if he leans on God, he becomes powerful."- D.L. Moody

1. Is it possible for a person to be strong-willed and tough, yet at the same time be humble and treat others with respect and kindness?
2. Who do you know who possesses all of these traits?
3. Do you respect and admire this person?
4. Which of these traits do you most need to work on to be more like Jesus?
5. If the entire team committed to taking on the traits of Jesus, would this help us win more games?