

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part III
THE CROWN OF THORNS

Matthew 27:27-31

IN THE NAME of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who also wore a crown of thorns:

Our Lenten series is titled MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events within the Passion History, and especially of that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to atone for our sins.

The first memento we discussed was an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume, which Mary of Bethany used to anoint Jesus for burial. **“She has done a beautiful thing to Me,”** said Jesus. **“When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial,”** Matthew 26:10, 12.

The second memento was blood-money, specifically, the thirty silver coins Judas Iscariot was paid to betray Jesus to the religious leaders of Israel. Judas asked: **“ ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins,”** Matthew 26:15.

Tonight, the third memento of Christ's passion, namely, THE CROWN OF THORNS described in Matthew 27:27-31. **“Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around Him. They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on His head. They put a staff in His right hand and knelt in**

front of Him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on Him, and took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again. After they had mocked Him, they took off the robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they led Him away to crucify Him.”

What was this crown of thorns? Over time, the thorns in the crown have been associated with a variety of plants; and most often, perhaps, with the so-called *Jerusalem Crown of Thorns*. But the exact species of plant, shrub, or tree is unknown. Still, in our electronic age one can go online and purchase an ‘*authentic* crown of thorns from the Holy Land,’ or even a crown-of-thorns headband with images of sharp thorns and smeared blood—surely a form of mockery the Roman soldiers would have endorsed and enjoyed. Jesus in a headband. Jesus in a fake royal robe. Jesus with a make-believe scepter.

Through the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has made fantastic claims about the crown of thorns; for example, that when Gregory of Tours supposedly saw the crown of thorns in the Sixth Century A.D., it was still tender, green, and blossoming; furthermore, that the crown of thorns was on display in Jerusalem as late as 870 A.D—no doubt for tickets and tours.; and most of all, that the Roman Catholic Church possessed seven hundred thorns of the original crown, with each thorn an object of veneration and worship. Never mind worshipping the Savior who wore the crown of thorns.

All nonsense, of course; as nonsensical as the Catholic claim to have fragments of the cross of Jesus. John Calvin, a Protestant reformer, once observed that, if all the splinters of the cross allegedly in Rome’s possession were gathered together, they would provide enough wood to build a large ship.

Yet, while we don't know the type of thorns in the crown, we do know the rich symbolism of the crown of thorns; at least, when adorning the sacred head of Jesus Christ. In the words of the hymnist: "See, from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did e'er such love and sorrow meet or *thorns compose so rich a crown?*" What then does this memento, the crown of thorns, represent? Many answers could be given. But in the time allotted to us, I'll suggest three.

First, the crown of thorns represents suffering; and more precisely, the dreadful pain and unspeakable suffering that Jesus endured when redeeming us from our sins.

Thorns may be beneficial to thorn-plants; however, they serve but one purpose for human beings—to inflict pain. Most of us have experienced the pain of even one 'thorn in the flesh.' But Jesus Christ was crowned with thorns. The thorns cut. The Savior bled. And when He bled, how many of the six hundred soldiers present expressed sympathy or hurried for antiseptic and bandages? None.

Rather, according to Matthew 27:30, once the crown of thorns was firmly in place, the soldiers **"took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again."** The Greek verb for "struck" is in the imperfect tense, signifying on going action and therefore continuous blows. An entire company of soldiers. How many of them hit Jesus? All of them? "My turn." "No, my turn."

And remember, Matthew 27:27-31 is only a brief part of the Passion History; and only one part of the torturous pain Jesus endured from the time of His betrayal in Gethsemane to the time of His death on the cross. And in the intervening time: slapping, beating; scourging with the dreaded Roman

flagellum, a whip made of leather straps tipped with sharp rocks or jagged metal which literally tore flesh from bone.

And then, the agony of the crucifixion itself; a punishment so painful that it was reserved for only the vilest of criminals and the lowest of slaves. Our English word *excruciating* is based on the Latin word *excruciatu*s, which literally means “out of the cross.” The pain inflicted by the cross—which, thank God, none of us know; yet pain our Lord Jesus knew intimately.

Overall, the Bible describes the suffering of our Savior in relatively *bloodless* terms. Even the crucifixion of Jesus is related in short, simple phrases; though we know from ancient historians and modern archaeological excavations how gruesome and bloody and lengthy crucifixions were. Still, we read in the Gospels: “**when they had crucified Him,**” Matthew 27:35; “**and they crucified Him,**” Mark 15:23; “**there they crucified Him,**” Luke 23:33; “**here they crucified Him,**” John 19:18.

Yet, dear friends, despite the bloodless descriptions, blood was everywhere—our Lord’s precious blood. Blood from the crown of thorns on His head to the Roman nails in His feet. Blood from Pilate’s Praetorium to the rocky precipice of Golgotha. Blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. As Paul wrote: “**In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,**” Ephesians 1:7. As John wrote: “**The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from all sin,**” 1 John 1:7.

And as Isaiah wrote: “**Surely, He took up *our* infirmities and carried *our* sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for *our* transgressions, He was crushed for *our***

iniquities; the punishment that brought *us* peace was upon Him, and by His wounds *we* are healed,” Isaiah 53:5. That crown of thorns was a symbol of our Savior’s suffering. And He wore that crown for us.

Second, the crown of thorns represents abject humility. Humility characterized the Savior’s life. He was born in a barn. He associated with the outcasts and misfits, tax collectors and sinners. By His own admission, He had no place to call home. He said, **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head,”** Matthew 8:20.

Yet, consider how deeply Christ humbled Himself through the ordeals of His passion. He was relentlessly mocked. Mocked by the Jewish Sanhedrin: **“Then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit You?’ ”** Matthew 26:67-68.

Even when crucified, Jesus was mocked. Mocked by the soldiers who pounded the nails, while cursing this silly Jewish rabbi and His claims to be the Son of God. Mocked by travelers and curiosity-seekers who came to Golgotha for Friday entertainment. Mocked by the religious leaders of Israel; the pastors, teachers, youth ministers, and doctors of theology. Mocked even by the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus. Mocked by the superscription nailed to the cross, above that sacred head crowned with thorns: **JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.** It was meant to be a joke of cosmic proportions. HA-HA-HA.

In Matthew 27:27-31, every action of the soldiers was meant to humiliate and mock the Savior. They stripped Him naked. They gave Him the mock trappings of royalty: a scarlet

robe, a staff for a scepter, a crown of thorns. They rendered Him mock obedience, bending the knee before Him and saying, **“Hail, king of the Jews!”** How loud was that chorus with six hundred battle-hardened Roman soldiers chanting it? I wonder: Did their insults and spiteful words hurt Him as much as their whips and thorny crown—hurt this loving God who made them, provided for them, and came to die for them too? Yes, I think their words hurt Jesus too; the curses that should have been praises.

Nor was this the end of their gleeful humiliation. They struck Jesus repeatedly on the head with that make-believe scepter. They spit into the face of God, as the unbelieving still do when they reject Jesus as Lord and Savior. Even the last sentence of the text underscores the extent to which Jesus humbled Himself: **“Then they led Him away to crucify Him,”** Matthew 27:31.

They led Him, because He *let* them lead Him—the One of whom Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9, **“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”** The One who could have blinked them out of existence and their universe with them. The One who told Peter in Gethsemane: **“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think that I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?”** Matthew 26:52-54.

This is why Jesus endured such humiliation, ridicule, spitting, beating, and contemptuous treatment; and without one word of objection or complaint. Not because He had to, Not because He was forced to. But because He wanted to in order to fulfill the Scriptures and to keep God’s promises of salvation

through the sacrifice of God’s Son. Nails did not hold Jesus to the cross; love and faithfulness did.

And so Peter wrote: **“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.’ 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 justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed,”** 1 Peter 2:21-24. That crown of thorns was a symbol of our Savior’s abject humility. And He wore that crown for us.

Finally, the crown of thorns represents salvation; your salvation, my salvation, the salvation obtained for the whole world through the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Each midweek Lenten service, we read part of the Passion History. And when reading this history, we may mistakenly conclude that Jesus was merely the victim of uncontrollable and unforeseen circumstances. Jesus betrayed. Jesus denied. Jesus arrested, bound, and shuffled like helpless human cargo between Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. Jesus falsely accused and wrongly condemned. And finally, Jesus nailed to the cross.

Yet, the early church came to realize that what happened to Jesus during His passion was not the result of happenstance but of God’s eternal design. So the believers prayed in Acts 4: **“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed. They did what Your**

power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” Which is exactly why Jesus told Pilate in John 19:11, **“You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above.”**

My friends, when the Roman soldiers placed a crown of thorns on Christ’s head, their intent was to mock Him. Little did they know how accurately they were describing Him—this God who loved us enough to suffer and die for us; this God who governs the universe and our lives not merely as the King of Kings, but the King who wore a crown of thorns; this God who Himself came to deliver us by becoming a curse for us.

One of the consequences of Man’s fall into sin was this: **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce THORNS and THISTLES for you,”** Genesis 3:17-18. To which Paul replied in Galatians 3:13, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ ”**

That crown of thorns was a symbol of our curse. That crown of thorns was a symbol of Christ our substitute, who took our curse upon Himself. That crown of thorns was a symbol of our salvation. And Jesus Christ wore that crown of thorns for us.