

Crown of Thorns

Matthew 27:27-61

Key Verse: 27:28-29

“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. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said.”

It's Easter-time and if you've been in any store since middle of February, you have probably have noticed the barrage of pastels, candy, chocolate, bunnies, chicks, eggs and baskets. To most people in this country, Easter is just a celebration of spring, where all things are new. They go and buy the candy and chocolate (and chocolate bunnies). They go and put some candy or money into little plastic eggs and hide them in places for kids to find. It's a lot of fun, unless you are the kid who can't find even one egg. Other people hard boil eggs and color them with dye. There are even more people who get a butter lamb and eat real lamb or a ham. Houses have palm branches and Easter lilies. There is definitely a season of Easter, but most of this country, let alone the world, miss something that is very important. Now, if you do any of the things I mentioned, it's not bad. In fact, go ahead and do it. There isn't necessarily any harm in them, but don't stop there. Easter exists for a very specific reason. The time of Easter is the remembrance and celebration of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. That's why we are here: to remember and celebrate the greatest event in all human history. Nothing like it had ever happened before or will ever happen again. Easter is the coronation of the King of kings and the anointing of the Lord of lords. Like all coronations, there is a crown, but it's not like the crowns that we think and it is not the crown we expect.

When we start this passage, we are in the middle of some events and to help us understand what is going on, I'm going to step back and talk a little about how we got to this passage. Jesus had been healing, teaching and giving hope in his ministry for about three and a half years. The religious leaders despised Jesus because he didn't submit to their authority, he submitted first and foremost to God's authority. After three years of being grated and undermined, the religious leaders plotted to kill Jesus. They concocted lies and false witnesses to create a case against him. There was an unfair trial that found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and he was brought before the Roman governor, Pilate. The religious leaders said that Jesus was undermining Roman authority by calling himself king, but Pilate couldn't find any basis for a charge against Jesus. Then, to expedite the process, the religious leaders riled up the crowd to have him crucified. Pilate eventually gave in to the crowd and ordered Jesus to be crucified. An innocent man was sentenced to death because some men were jealous and the crowd demanded his blood. That seems pretty tragic.

It doesn't stop there, though. “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. Then they knelt in front of him and mocked 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.” (27-31) Before they killed Jesus, the soldiers had a little fun with him. They stripped him of his clothes and made him a mock king, complete with a robe, a crown and a staff. The crown was a crown of thorns, and those thorns weren't like rose thorns, which are small and break off, they were like two-inch wooden spikes that don't bend or break. Those spikes touched his head and dug in with every blow to the head that the soldiers made. The Bible says that the soldiers struck Jesus on the head with the staff again and again, and the thorns pierced him causing his blood to flow into his eyes. The crown that Jesus wore was a

crown of thorns – it was a crown of pain. The symbol of God’s curse on the ground was placed on the head of Jesus.

When they were done with him, the soldiers led him out to be killed. Usually, the condemned would carry their own cross, but Jesus was already so worn and broken that they had a random man on the street named Simon carry the cross for him. The soldiers led Jesus outside the city to an outcropping of rock that resembled a bare skull, so much so that the place was called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. At Golgotha, they crucified Jesus by nailing him to a piece of wood like a railroad tie. The soldiers took these large, maybe six in long pieces of metal and drove them through Jesus’ outstretched hands and down by his feet. They then lifted him up high for everyone to see, because a crucifixion wasn’t merely a form of execution, it was a way to cause the most pain for the longest time all the while the one hanging there was mocked, insulted, yelled at, spit on, humiliated and shamed. All that, plus the person would be naked or nearly naked. Just to take a breath, a person would have to lift themselves up on the nails. People would normally hang there for days before actually dying and when they died, it wouldn’t be from the pain or blood loss, but from suffocation. It is the most painful, shameful and humiliating way to die. It was so painful that they had to invent a word to describe it: excruciating.

The people crucified Jesus in the middle of two rebels, or robbers as some of your translations might say, one on his right and another on his left. The implication was that Jesus was their leader and guilty of the same crimes the other men were. The whole situation was as bad as you could imagine. The Bible says, “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!’ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, “I am the Son of God.”’ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.” (39-44) Everybody at Golgotha was just insulting and mocking Jesus: the people who passed by, the religious leaders who orchestrated this event, and even the other criminals on their own crosses. All the world’s hatred was turned upon Jesus. As he hung on the cross, Jesus was shamed and humiliated in every way possible. The people threw his own words in his face. “Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” The people mocked his identity. Names have meaning and are signs of great hope for a child. Jesus’ name means “the Lord saves,” and, yet, the religious leaders mocked Jesus saying that he couldn’t save himself and that he trusts God, so let God rescue him. All of his teaching and all of his efforts in the past three and a half years appeared to be for naught. Even the people closest to Jesus abandoned him in his time of greatest need. Jesus was all alone, writhing in pain and swimming in shame.

As if that wasn’t enough, at about noon the world became dark as creation began to feel the weight of what was happening. “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*’ (which means ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’).” (46) All people rejected Jesus, but worse than that, God also rejected Jesus. The fullness of God’s great wrath was poured out in its entirety on Jesus. Jesus was God’s own son. Why would he do that to him? I don’t know of any Father that would subject their children to what Jesus went through. Why would God, who is the very definition of good, subject his first-born son to torture, abandonment, humiliation, shame, and even death? If you look at what Jesus

says here, it looks like he is asking the same question. He said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" To be forsaken is another way of saying that Jesus was abandoned. It looks like Jesus felt the weight of what was happening to him and he just cried out in anguish. Have you ever done that? Have you ever been so completely frustrated or broken that you cried out in your anguish? Did you ever feel like everything in your life was going wrong: you failed a big test or there is trouble at work, you've gotten sick or injured, you got into a fight with your friends and you don't know why, and your bank account is down to ten bucks? Everywhere you turn, there is something that just adds to your stress level. Don't you just want to scream and let all that stress out? Looking at what Jesus was going through, we can make that extension to what Jesus said.

Unfortunately, it's not quite like that. This wasn't merely some cry of anguish from Jesus. There may have been some anguish in his words, but there is more. Remember, Jesus is hanging on the cross. For him to breathe, let alone speak or cry out loudly, Jesus would have to pull himself up on the nails in his hands and his feet. It would be intensely painful. For Jesus to cry out like he did, he would have to take special effort to do so. It wasn't a last gasp of anguish. He may have felt anguish, but his pain did not cause him to cry out. His cry was deliberate and you can also see that in what he said. When Jesus said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me", he was actually quoting something that King David wrote nearly a thousand years prior. King David was the greatest king that Israel had ever had and he was a direct human ancestor to Jesus. David was considered by God to be a man after God's own heart. He wrote a number of songs in the Bible that are called psalms. He didn't write all of the psalms, but some of them. Psalm 22 begins with the exact same words that Jesus spoke on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1) The Psalm foreshadows Jesus' very crucifixion. God inspired David to write the psalm so that the fullness of what was happening to Jesus would be known beforehand, to show that Jesus' crucifixion was not some random act of violence, but it was planned for a very long time. When Jesus quoted Psalm 22, it was almost like Jesus was having a little Bible study with the people surrounding him, telling them to remember what King David wrote and see their actions in light of God's words.

Although Jesus was filled with anguish, his words on the cross were also meant for people to recognize that God had a plan. It was a very complete and specific plan, so much so that God even foretold the mocking. I want to read a little more of Psalm 22. It says, "Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. 'He trusts in the Lord,' they say, 'let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.'" (Psalm 22:3-8) Those verses sound an awful lot like the mocking and insults that were being poured out on Jesus.

Again, we come to the question of why or what plan could there be? Why did Jesus wear this crown of thorns? (And I don't mean merely the physical crown of thorns, but everything that he went through was his crown of thorns.) Why did this happen to Jesus? He was an innocent man, why did God plan for his son to die in such a terrible way? Exactly as Jesus asked, why was he forsaken? There is another old text that shows God's plan concerning Jesus. The Bible says in the book of Isaiah, written 600 years before Jesus, "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and

afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:4-6) Those verses carry a lot of “we”s and “us”es. Did you catch them all? “He took up our pain and bore our suffering.” “He was pierced for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus was forsaken for our sake. Jesus was abandoned so that we would not be abandoned. Jesus wore the crown of thorns so that we could wear a crown of glory.

Everything that Jesus bore on the cross was meant for us. Look at everything that happened to Jesus: the pain, the shame, the humiliation, the mocking, the insults, the abandonment, the death and everything else. Those are our fears. Those are the things that we are afraid will happen to us if people found out everything about us. If people found out our deepest darkest secrets, we’re afraid that we would be ostracized and shamed. We become afraid that we will die. However, Jesus took all the punishment for all of our dark secrets. What we feared would happen to us, actually happened to him. Jesus was despised and rejected because of you and because of me. Again, there is that question of why. Why did Jesus have to be punished in our place? Why did it have to be so horrible? The answer is simply one word: sin.

We do a lot of evil things that go against God. Like one of the verses that I read from Isaiah, “We, all like sheep, have gone astray, and we have turned to our own way.” (Isaiah 53:6) Sin in its simplest terms is a separation from God. Sin is when we disobey God and try to do things our way. That doesn’t sound too bad, but because God is inherently good, when we walk away from him, we walk toward evil. When we stop doing good, the only way to go is to do evil, and that is sin. People are evil and selfish, all you have to do is look at the TV or read the news or even drive down the street. Selfishness is rampant and evil thoughts prevail, but God is good and just. If God is good and just, would he want a bunch of evil people to live forever? No! There are consequences to our actions. If you steal or murder, then there are punishments for that, and it is the same for every sin. Every time you step away from God, you are supposed to be punished for that. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and that might seem harsh, but think about this: God is the source of life, when you step away from life the result is death. It is the very definition of what it means to step away from God, but the wonderful thing is that Jesus took the punishment that was meant for us. His crucifixion and death were meant for us. Whether you believe it or not, Jesus’ grizzly death and all the shame, pain and humiliation is the punishment for our sins. We might think that that is a bit severe, but then you just denying how bad you really are. Our sins deserve God’s full wrath, but Jesus took that wrath for us. He became our sin and God raged against him.

God’s wrath was complete, if you read on in the passage you see that Jesus gave up his spirit. Jesus died on the cross. Not only did Jesus take the torture, shame and all that, but also he died and sure enough he was dead. He was placed in tomb and it was sealed shut. There were witnesses to this fact in the women who followed Jesus from Galilee, and even as you’ll see in the next passage, the religious leaders who had Jesus crucified also confirmed his death. Jesus was dead and that is significant because the wages of sin is death and Jesus, although innocent took the punishment – the whole punishment – that was intended for us. There was no part of the punishment that Jesus didn’t experience. People tried to give him a numbing agent, but he refused it. (34) To take our whole punishment, Jesus needed to feel everything.

But why did Jesus do it? Why take our punishment? Jesus did it out of love for us and love for God, but it had to be specifically Jesus because he was pure and sinless. When Jesus was crucified, it was a time of celebration for the Jews called Passover. Passover celebrates the Jewish release from Egyptian slavery, where God's wrath would pass over anybody whose lamb's blood painted on the doorframe of his or her house. Without the blood, the angel of God would kill any first-born son in the residence. This was to be a curse on the Egyptians so that they would set the Jews free. In remembrance of that event, Jews would have a festival where a lamb without defect would be sacrificed as atonement for sin. Do you see where I am going? Jesus is the great Passover lamb. During Passover, when so many people would come to Jerusalem to celebrate, Jesus was sacrificed for our sins so that God's wrath would pass over us. Just like the Passover lamb needed to be without defect, the one to take our sins away also needed to be without defect, to be without sin, and only Jesus fit that bill because he was the Son of God.

Take a look at the events that happened right around Jesus' death. The Bible doesn't say that he died, but it says that Jesus gave up his spirit. The words signify that Jesus's life wasn't taken from him, but that he gave it up willingly. Who has the authority to choose when to give up his life? Only someone as powerful as God can do that. Also, take a look at everything else. "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people." (51-53) I can tell you that those aren't normal things. The curtain referred to in this passage was 4 inches thick and impossible to rip with human hands. It separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. The curtain signified God's holiness and showed the barrier between God and man that our sins created, but at Jesus' death, that curtain was torn from top to bottom. Also, there was an earthquake, rocks splitting open, tombs opening and people coming back to life. That doesn't usually happen when someone dies. Now, there was a soldier there, a centurion, one of the men who crucified Jesus, and he saw everything that happened and he said, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (54) His words couldn't have been more true. The only explanation that fits is that Jesus is the Son of God!

There are two ways you can react to this and they are actually both right. Our sin subjected the Son of God, God himself, to pain, shame, and death. If we were not sinners, Jesus would not have had to die in such a terrible way. It is your fault that this was all happening. I was my sin that hung him on a tree. We should be cut to the heart and filled with sorrow and repentance for what Jesus had to go through. We killed Jesus; we killed God, and that should drive us to tears. More than that, though, Jesus' death represents our liberation from sin. He took the punishment that we were due. By grace, Jesus willingly stepped in front of God's wrath and satisfied it. Jesus' death is so powerful that all sins for all time have been forgiven for those who believe. Every sin that you have ever committed and every sin you will commit has been forgiven because of Jesus. You know, that sin that you will commit later today? Forgiven. How about the sin twenty years from now? Forgiven. There is no sin that is too great that cannot be forgiven. "The death he died, he died to sin once for all!" (Romans 6:10) How does that make you feel? Do you grumble about it? I surely hope not! Are you relieved and thankful for what Jesus has done? It is amazing to think that Jesus paid it all! We don't have to live in fear of punishment for our sins. Jesus paid all of it. He took everything. We don't have to face God's wrath. Did you see what Jesus went through? There is nothing more for us to do! Oh, what a glorious day! The thorns were our thorns, the nails were our nails, the insults were our insults, and the abandonment was our abandonment. Gracefully and

willingly, Jesus came to our rescue. We should have a dichotomy – a duality – of feelings. We should feel both sad and repentant, and joyful and thankful.

That dichotomy is not unusual. If you look at the news, when someone is rescued and they are interviewed. They are very thankful to the person who rescued them. You don't see a lot of remorse for needing to be rescued, but you do see it if the person who rescued them died. If someone is pulled from a burning building and their dies in the process, that person has a lot of sadness because if they got out a little sooner, then their rescuer would not have died. If they weren't in the building, no one would have died. Yet, that person would still be eternally thankful that they were saved. There would be joy and thankfulness in their heart and it should be the same way with Jesus. Because we were sinners, Jesus died; but because he came to save us, we can now be alive.

The crown of thorns that the soldiers put on Jesus is a crown of pain. It is a symbol of God's curse and an object of scorn and wrath. This crown of thorns was more than the wreath on his head; it was everything that Jesus went through before the cross, on the cross and all the way to death. It is a vile and nasty thing. Though, ironically, that very crown of thorns is also a crown of glory in that it marks the abolishment of our sins. If there is any nagging feeling of condemnation, then all we have to do is point to the cross and say that Jesus already took that condemnation for us. The Bible says that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and that is possible because of Jesus crucifixion and death. You can be relieved at your salvation. Because of that crown of thorns, our debt is paid and nothing can separate our hearts from his great love! "We believe our God is Jesus We believe that He is Lord We believe that He has saved us From sin and death Once and for all!" (*Once and For All*, Chris Tomlin)