

John 19:1-16 - "Crown of Thorns"

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The word "crown" comes from a Greek word (στέφανο) which means "to encircle." When crowns are placed on and encircle a person's head, it has come to symbolize things like victory and honor, wealth and power for that person. Take for example the leaves of the laurel plant, which were placed on and encircled the heads of those who were victorious in the olympic games. The background of this crown comes from ancient Greek mythology which associates the laurel plant with the Greek god, Apollo, who, in their mythology was the god of many things, including health or fitness. Therefore, when you won at race, a crown of laurel leaves were placed on and encircled your head as a sign that the Greek god, Apollo, was smiling upon you.

But perhaps the most common crowns are those associated with Kings and Queens. When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom (and other Commonwealth Nations) in 1953, the Imperial State Crown of England was placed on and encircled her head. The frame work of this crown is gold, silver, and platinum, and it's adorned with over 2,800 diamonds, 273 pearls, 17 sapphires, 11 emeralds and 5 rubies. The main diamond on the front of this crown is the second largest cut diamond in the world (the largest cut diamond in the world is attached to the top of Queen Elizabeth II's scepter). When this crown is placed on and encircles your head, it's a sign of great wealth and power.

Now we come to the greatest and most unusual crown in all history. That's the "crown of thorns" that was stuck on the head of the "King of kings," "Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15), and "God of gods" (Psalm 136:2), Jesus Christ. The reason some Roman "soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on [Jesus'] head" was to mock and further torture Him.

Last week, when I talked about Jesus being flogged, part of our focus was on trusting in God even during times of unexplained suffering. But the more we study the Scriptures, the more the LORD helps us to see that the "crown of thorns" stuck on Jesus' head was not just another way of causing Him to suffer. The "crown of thorns" on Jesus' head is meant to comfort us.

When did painful thorns first infest this world? Right after man's fall into sin, as we heard in our OT reading. Speaking to Adam, the LORD God said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **thorns** and thistles it shall bring forth for you."

Now consider why God the Father sent His Son to become a man in Jesus Christ, to wear a “*crown of thorns*,” and to die on a cross. Remember, the word crown means to encircle, and a circle is unending. The “*crown of thorns*” stuck on Jesus’ head is meant to let us know that Jesus had come to suffer the unending, eternal punishment of Adam and Eve’s sin, and our sin, through His damning death on the cross. And through His resurrection from the dead our LORD assured us of His victory over the eternal suffering and death we deserve.

That’s one of the things of which the “*crown of thorns*” is meant to remind us. When the Roman “*soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on [Jesus’] head*,” they unknowingly crowned Jesus as the promised Savior who would set us free from the curse—the painful thorns, suffering and death of this world caused by our sins. This honor could be given to no one else but the God/Man, Jesus Christ.

What about the thorns in the flesh that we, like St. Paul, suffer in this life? They too, like Jesus’ suffering, are meant for our good (perhaps to humble us), or somehow for the good of others. But thanks be to God, all such suffering will not be eternal because of what Jesus went through for us on the cross. The “*crown of thorns*” that encircled His head is another reminder of this Good News.

Let me refer you to one more place where thorns are mentioned in the Bible, and that’s in Psalm 118. This Psalm was originally written during a time when enemy nations surrounded Israel/God’s people, threatening them with extinction. But even though David wrote that the enemy nations surrounded God’s people like “*bees*,” he continues by saying that, “*they went out like a fire among thorns.*”

In Martin Luther’s comments about this verse he says that persecutors of Christ were like bees that stung His humanity but could not touch His divinity. Believers can also be stung in the same way, but they cannot be destroyed. Bees die when they lose their stingers. The thorns burn quickly, and soon the fire is out. So it is with persecution; its heat cannot last (AE 11:412–13.).

Like COVID-19, the threatening language of the Equality Act toward the Church, and other thorns in this life (even the thorn of death itself), none of them will have a lasting effect on us who are in Christ Jesus. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead on the third day, just as He promised, assures us of this.

In the comfort of this Good News, may the LORD continue to enable us to be humble, and patient (especially during times of suffering) as we, through our words and actions, share the victory of our thorn-crowned, crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

All glory be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.