

## Matthew 27:27-31

### Introduction

Two weeks ago, we saw the people of Israel choosing for themselves Jesus Barabbas and demanding that the “Jesus who is called Christ” should be crucified. And so Matthew tells us that Pilate “released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.” Not one of the Gospel writers ever emphasizes the physical sufferings of Jesus. We know that Roman flogging was a brutal and horrific thing. Carson writes:

“Among the Jews scourging was limited to forty lashes (Deut 25:3; cf. 2Cor 11:24), but the Romans were restricted by nothing but their strength and whim. The whip was the dreaded *flagellum*, made by plaiting pieces of bone or lead into leather thongs. The victim was stripped and tied to a post. Severe flogging not only reduced the flesh to bloody pulp but could open up the body until the bones were visible and the entrails exposed (cf. TDNT, 4:510-12; Jos. War II, 612 [xxi.5]; VI, 304 [v.3]). Flogging as an independent punishment not infrequently ended in death.”

And yet for all of its terrors, Matthew notes the scourging of Jesus with a simple statement made almost in passing: “Then [Pilate] released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.” The worst forms of physical torture that Jesus endured were by far the scourging and the actual crucifixion. Entire articles and chapters have been written on the excruciating physical torments of Roman crucifixion. And yet once again, Matthew will note the fact of the crucifixion with just one brief statement made almost in passing: “They offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them” (27:34-35). Matthew is not minimizing the physical sufferings of Jesus. Everyone in Matthew’s day would have known immediately what scourging and crucifixion meant. But Matthew doesn’t want the horrors of the physical sufferings themselves—which were no different than the sufferings of multitudes of others who had also been crucified—he doesn’t want the horrors of these sufferings to distract us from the deeper *meaning* of Jesus death, and what this death says about *who Jesus is*. This is where we need to at least be cautious about a movie like “The Passion of the Christ.” I would suggest that the primary emphasis in the Passion of the Christ is (as a matter of necessity) not at all the emphasis in the Gospels. This might not necessarily be a bad thing, but I wonder if this reality should at least help us to think, and to exercise caution. At the least, may we always find the theologically rich and God-breathed accounts of the Gospels to be infinitely more powerful and infinitely more moving than any cinematic production could ever hope to be. I say all these things so that we can be prepared to better understand what happens next. Let’s ask this question: If Matthew devotes almost no time at all to any description of the physical sufferings of Jesus, then what *does* he spend his time describing? If Matthew devotes only one passing word to the scourging of Jesus, and only one passing word to the fact of His crucifixion, then *why* does he spend now five entire verses describing the mockery that Jesus received at the hands of the Roman soldiers? What does a description of this mockery tell us about Jesus that a description of the scourging never could?

**I. Matthew 27:27** — Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.

Rather than actual Romans, these soldiers of the governor were probably Gentiles who had been hired from the lands immediately surrounding Israel. So we can just imagine what they would have thought of this Jew’s claim to be a king – irregardless of what kind. A battalion of these soldiers would technically be made up of six hundred men. So even though Matthew is probably referring to all of the battalion *who were present and available at the time* we should still imagine a very large group of soldiers – maybe still numbering in the hundreds. Normally, only four soldiers would be assigned to an execution. But now that Jesus has been turned over to them, they first want to have a little “fun.” “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him.”

**II. Matthew 27:28** — And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him.

The “robe” was actually a military cloak (*chlamyda*) like the kind worn by the governor’s soldiers. It was shorter than a standard “robe” (*himation*) and colored with a cheap red dye (France). Matthew says that the cloak was “scarlet.” But it seems that scarlet was considered to be in the same basic family of colors with purple. Or maybe the shade of this particular cloak was somewhere in between a purple and a red? Whatever the case may be, both Mark and John say that the cloak was purple. John even uses the normal Greek word for “robe” (*himation*), and so the “scarlet cloak” in Matthew becomes a “purple robe” in John (John 19:5). Matthew highlights the cheap and mocking imitation (a red cloak). John highlights what the red cloak was obviously meant to imitate – the purple robe worn by royalty.

So the soldiers are playing “dress up” with Jesus. It’s a game of “make believe.” The scarlet cloak will do for the purple robe. But what else does a “pretend” king need? What about a pretend crown?

**III. Matthew 27:29** — And twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head.

The point is not the thorns. The point is not the pain which these thorns would cause. We could actually translate, “a crown made from the branches of a thorn bush.” The main point is the cheap and mocking *imitation*. There was a thorny bush nearby with branches that could easily be cut off and bent and twisted together to form a circle. These men are enjoying their game so much that they even spend a few moments putting together this part of Jesus’ “costume.” They made a “crown” from the branches of a thorn bush and then we can imagine them arranging it on Jesus’ head. Once again, the point here is not physical torture, but ridicule, and humiliation, and shame. Every “pretend” king needs a pretend crown. But now for Jesus’ royal costume, the soldiers have one more idea. “Twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head...”

**IV. Matthew 27:29** — And [they] put a reed in his right hand.

On the one hand, this reed wasn’t just a flimsy, flexible sort of willowy plant. It had to have been a heavy reed, stiff enough and strong enough to beat someone over the head with (27:3). But on the other hand, this “reed” would not have been as “nice” as a common staff or rod (cf. Rev.

11:1). In a game of dress up and make believe, it was the perfect cheap imitation of a royal scepter.

So can you see Him now, standing there, all dressed up with His robe, and crown, and scepter? And when we see Him standing there like this, how long can we look before our eyes shrink away? It would seem that there is nothing in this picture to “behold” – nothing but the most horrible kind of debasement, and humiliation, and shame. A completely naked and bloodied Jesus has been draped in a military cloak, “adorned” with the twisted branches of a thorn bush, and then made to hold a reed in His right hand – *as though He were a king*. But there’s the secret. That’s *exactly* what Matthew wants us to see. He *is* a King. That’s been the main point of the entire book of Matthew.

So *why* does Matthew spend only a few words describing the physical sufferings of Jesus, and then spend five verses describing in detail this scene of mockery and scorn? There’s only one possible answer – but to most people—and certainly to these soldiers—it’s completely ludicrous and absurd. In this vision of Jesus dressed up as a pretend King, Matthew is seeing and beholding the *true* King of all kings – who even in that very moment possessed sovereign authority over all. Here is the only King in all the history of the world who has *authority to lay down His life* so that He may take it up again (John 10:17-18). Here is the only king in all the history of the world who submits to the ridicule and the mockery of his claims to kingship in order to fulfill His own sovereign and *kingly* word. Jesus explicitly told His disciples that the chief priests and scribes would deliver Him over to the Gentiles, and that He would be *mocked*, and flogged, and crucified (20:18-19). He told them not just that these things *would* happen, but that they *must* happen (16:21; 26:54).

On the one hand, everything about this picture is so terrible, and even sickening, that our eyes shrink away from even looking. But then again, everything about this picture is exactly as it’s *supposed* to be – exactly as the *King* said it *must* be. And that’s what we must never, ever forget – not even for one moment. So what Matthew wants us to do is force ourselves to look again. Look again! And what should we see? The cheap scarlet cloak is still a cheap scarlet cloak, but now it’s the true clothing of *royalty*. The twisted branches of a thorn bush are still just the twisted branches of a thorn bush, but now they’ve become a true symbol of glory and honor – a crown fit for our King. The reed that was pressed into Jesus’ right hand is still just that – a reed, but now it has become a true sign of His sovereign authority and right to rule – a scepter fit for the King of kings. *Why* does Matthew spend only a few words describing the physical sufferings of Jesus, and then spend five verses describing in detail this scene of mockery and scorn? It’s because Matthew sees in this scene, and therefore in *all* of Jesus’ sufferings not just shame, and humiliation, and disgrace, but *also*, and somehow even *most of all*, His true honor, and majesty, and glory.

But obviously, the soldiers are blinded to all such “foolishness,” and so now that they have Jesus dressed up as if He were a king, they ridicule and mock Him with the final insult:

**V. Matthew 27:29** — And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

To these Gentile soldiers, it seemed blatantly obvious that this Jew could not possibly be a king – of *any* kind at all. It wasn't even a question in their minds. They might admit that their words and actions were cruel and humiliating, but it was impossible for them to even conceive of the idea that they could be wrong about who Jesus was.

And so as we watch them *kneeling* before this dressed up Jesus and hailing him as King of the Jews, and if we could enter into this picture and be there in Pilate's headquarters, what would we do? Would we look the other way in dismay and horror? But the very reason that Matthew includes these verses is so that we might meditate on what we see. So would we be overcome with anger and zeal and wish to draw our own swords? Or would we see even in this picture the true honor, and majesty, and glory of Jesus? And so even if it be with tears in our eyes, would we be compelled to kneel before Him—right there in Pilate's headquarters—and hail this dressed up Jesus as our *true King*? Of course, then we'll look just as absurd and foolish as Jesus does, won't we? We'll just be inviting upon ourselves all the same ridicule and mockery and abuse. But who really cares, right? Chrysostom put it simply: "Why should we henceforth care if anyone insults us after Christ has thus suffered?" (Quoted in Bruner) If Jesus endured that kind of scorn, then why should we ever again worry about what any man might think of us? May we delight to kneel before this dressed up Jesus in the middle of this mocking crowd of soldiers, and hail Him as our *true King*. May we be *happy* to look just as absurd and foolish as He did though all the whole world were laughing us to scorn. As Christians have we ever done or not done something, or said or not said something because we feared even just the amusement of others? It was so that we could be forgiven that Jesus endured the world's scorn. It was so that we might not be afraid to look foolish that He played the part of a fool for us.

**VI. Matthew 27:30–31** — And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

Seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah wrote down the words of God's suffering servant:

✓ Isaiah 50:6 — I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.

We have no way of knowing if Jesus was crucified with the crown of thorns still on His head. But we know at the very least that they took the reed away and stripped Him of His "robe." Prisoners were normally led naked to their execution. But probably to avoid offending the sensibilities of the Jewish crowds at Passover, after the soldiers had stripped Jesus of His cloak, they put His own clothes back on. And then they led Him away to crucify Him.

The costume has been taken away, but not before it helped us to see Jesus clearly for who He really is. He *is* the **King** who *suffers* for His people. And the reason He suffers for His people is so that He might subdue and conquer their hearts to willingly love and obey Him. Why did Matthew include these five verses? Because they actually tell us the *truth* about Jesus. *That's why*. Because they actually reveal to us His true majesty and glory. He *is* the King who suffers for His people.

The question is, can *we see the truth* in these verses? Can *we see His majesty and glory* even in these verses? And when we do, are we not compelled to love and obey Him with all of our hearts, and never to care again how much scorn and ridicule the world may ever, ever possibly heap upon us?

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–24, 30–31 — The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

## Conclusion

The scarlet cloak, and the crown of thorns, and the reed will always be symbols of the true majesty and glory of Jesus – much like the marks from the nails in His hands and feet. But the only reason this can be is because the mock enthronement of Jesus in the headquarters of the Roman governor will soon be followed by the *real* enthronement in heaven when Jesus receives from the Father all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18; cf. Bruner).

“If therefore, even in the present day, the world insolently mocks at Christ, let us learn to rise above these offences by elevated faith; and let us not stop to inquire, what unworthy opposition is made to Christ by wicked men, but with what ornaments the Father hath clothed him, with what scepter and with what crown he hath adorned him, so as to raise him high, not only above men, but even above all the angels.” (Calvin)

- ✓ Revelation 1:12–15 — Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, ***clothed with a long robe*** and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.
- ✓ Revelation 19:12 — His eyes are like a flame of fire, and ***on his head are many diadems***.
- ✓ Revelation 19:16 — ***On his robe*** and on his thigh he has a name written, ***King of kings and Lord of lords***.
- ✓ Hebrews 1:8 (cf. Genesis 49:10; Numbers 24:17) “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, ***the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom***.”
- ✓ Philippians 2:8–11 — Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus ***every knee should bow***, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ***and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord***, to the glory of God the Father.