

The Theme of Thorns

¹ So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged *Him*. ² And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put *it* on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. ³ Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands. ⁴ Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him." ⁵ Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And *Pilate* said to them, "Behold the Man!" (John 19:1-5)

The Shroud of Turin is a 4,5 metre by 1m long piece of linen cloth that some believe is a medieval forgery, and some believe is the actual burial shroud of Jesus Christ. It contains the negative image of a bearded man somewhere between 1,7 and 1,88 metres tall, a man who has been crucified, with wrists and feet pierced where Romans would have pierced them.

In the image, the man's face is swollen, especially on the right cheek, with some lacerations and bruising above the right eyes. The nose is possibly fractured.

What is very interesting is that there are over 30 puncture wounds on the scalp, and clear blood flows in the forehead, the neck, and the hairline. These puncture wounds go right around the head and appear to have been made by something that would have looked more like a cap of thorns, than the circlet of thorns seen in so many paintings.

Interestingly, one researcher took a sample of the pollens on the shroud, and found that 50% of them are from a thorny plant found only in Israel and Jordan, known as Turnafort's gundelia.

The crown of thorns is a one of the most well-known features of the crucifixion of Christ.

When it comes to the four Gospels, they sometimes overlap, and most often they complement and fill in details not seen from the other angles. It takes all four Gospels to gain the seven sayings from the cross. It takes all four Gospels to learn of the series of events that began in Gethsemane very late on Thursday night, all the way to the death of Jesus at 3pm on Friday, and his burial before sunset. Matthew tells us Jesus had to carry his cross. Mark and John tell us He was clothed in purple by Herod.

But Matthew, Mark, and John gives us the detail regarding what was placed on His head.

A crown of thorns. Of course a crown of thorns is a mockery, just like a sceptre from a reed. A crown is supposed to be made of gold and precious stones, things precious, beautiful, and costly, symbolising wealth, power, status, and glory. Thorns are ugly, cheap, worthless and painful. You don't want to handle them, let alone wear them. A crown of thorns is the ultimate visual mockery of someone who is supposed to be a king. You're wearing pain, ugliness, and uselessness.

But like many elements in the crucifixion, it is amazing how often what was meant for shame and ridicule, what was meant for insult and humiliation, ironically ended up carrying marvellous glory and truth. A few years ago on Good Friday, we noticed that many of the insults thrown at Jesus turned out to be truth. They said, "He saved others, Himself he cannot save!" - that was actually true. They said, "Let God save Him, if He will have Him" - that was true - the Father did raise Him from the dead. The sign above Him said in mockery - "This is Jesus, King of the Jews", but it was true.

So though some anonymous Roman soldiers thought they were being funny, and thought they were great heroes when they put the crown of thorns on Christ's head, and the reed as a sceptre in His hand, little did they know that they were being used to communicate powerful gospel truth. Today, as we meditate on the cross, we want to stare more closely at that crown of thorns, and again see the

marvellous artistry of God. To understand that, we'll first need to understand the meaning of thorns in the Bible. Second, we'll need to see the position of the thorns with respect to Christ. Third, we'll need to see the meaning of a crown of thorns.

I. The Curse Communicated By Thorns

The very first time we read of thorns is in Genesis, and it occurs right after man's sin in the Garden.

¹⁴ So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You *are* cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. ¹⁵ And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel." ¹⁶ To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire *shall be* for your husband, And he shall rule over you." ¹⁷ Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed *is* the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat *of* it All the days of your life. ¹⁸ Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field. ¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:14–19)

Here we aren't told if thorns existed before the Fall or not. Perhaps they did, but they were a minimal part of creation, and Adam's planting and harvesting didn't yield thorns. Or perhaps they didn't, and they are now introduced into the world as part of both a judgement on man for sinning, and also as a limitation upon man.

But go back a few verses and try to understand why these thorns occurred. In chapter 1:26-28, God gave man the right to rule the world on His behalf. He said, "Be fruitful and multiply, take dominion over the Earth." Man was anointed, as it were, by God to be a sub-king, a regent ruling for God's glory. When Satan came along, he tempted Eve with the idea of being not just a king under God, but a king equal to God: an autonomous king, knowing and defining good and evil for ourselves.

After eating of the fruit, the ground is cursed. Man's labours in the world are cursed. Human life and existence is cursed. What does that mean, "cursed"? In what way do thorns communicate the idea of the curse?

First, they are useless. You can't eat them. You can't burn them for fuel. You can't build anything out of them. In Jesus's parable of the soils, thorns choke out the good plants and prevent them from growing. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:16). Thorns are like the main word in Ecclesiastes: vanity. Emptiness, uselessness. The curse means that life is now full of emptiness, frustration, uselessness, wastage, and pointlessness.

Just as Adam would sow seeds for a fruit tree and there would be thorns growing instead, and killing the good growth, so in a fallen world, you try to do anything, and it is afflicted with problems, and opposition, and difficulties. Nothing comes easily. Your best efforts get frustrated. You try to start a family, a business, a church, an organisation, and you will face setback after setback, problem after problem. Try to do just about anything: have a healthy body, learn a skill, earn money, and you will soon experience frustration, futility. Instead of success, there will be waste, difficulty, opposition. And even those things that do work out: money, friendships, knowledge, skill, are still haunted by death. They come to an end, and death makes a mockery of all we build. Thorns.

Second, they are painful. If you step on them, or grab them, or if they grab your body or limbs, they only scratch and tear. Paul called whatever trial or affliction he had a “thorn in the flesh”. Thorns simply tear at you, prevent you from approaching, or otherwise make life difficult. The curse means that life is now full of pain: loss, calamity, hardship, violence, betrayal, disease, suffering, and death. Life is filled with piercing pain. You will experience in your own body the curse of disease, and pain, and aging and weakness. From others you will experience crime, betrayal, slander, theft, injury, deceptions, traps. From life in general you will experience accidents, calamities, catastrophes, disasters. From your own sin nature you will experience laziness and lack of desire, and malice and pettiness, and hatred. Thorns.

And that really sums up the curse. Life in a cursed world has both futility and affliction, both pointlessness and pain.

The curse is pointlessness and pain. It is the punishment of life not resolving and working out. It's the punishment of loss and misery and disappointment.

That's the curse. It's the world we made. You can try to escape it with more money, or more connections, or more discipline. But you will find that God has built the curse into everything: vanity of vanities, all is vanity. There is no weed-spray that will eliminate the thorns of life from all of your life.

In the Garden, Adam, who was already a sub-king, sought to be a higher king. What he got was a world with thorns. The crown that Satan laughingly threw at Adam's feet, was a crown of thorns.

So what are you doing with the problem of thorns? Are you cursing the curse? Hoping to escape it? Imagining you can outwit it?

But the story doesn't end there. Because the greatest story ever told is of a second Adam, a second Perfect Man.

II. The Curse Carried By Christ

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole garrison around Him. ²⁸ And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. ²⁹ When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put *it* on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰ Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. ³¹ And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His *own* clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. (Matthew 27:27–31)

What was the position of the thorns with respect to Jesus? The answer is that they were placed on His head. He carried them, bore them, not just as something in His hand to be discarded, but as His headdress. These emblems of the curse were on the most visible part of Jesus: His head. Had you looked at Jesus, you would have seen that He was bearing the emblems of the curse, the uniform of the curse.

O sacred Head, now wounded,
with grief and shame weighed down,
now scornfully surrounded
with thorns, thine only crown!
O sacred Head, what glory,
what bliss till now was thine!
Yet, though despised and gory,

I joy to call thee mine.

What did this mean? Paul tells us what it meant for Jesus to be hanging on the cross.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*"),¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13–14)

Paul tells us that Christ's work on the cross redeems us from the curse, because He became the curse. Where did He become the curse? It says, Cursed Is he who hangs on a tree. That's a quotation of Deuteronomy 21:23

²² "If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,²³ his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged *is* accursed of God. (Deuteronomy 21:22–23)

Paul now points out that Christ's death on the cross was the death penalty, being hung on a tree. Of course, we don't think of the cross as a tree, but crosses were made of rough hewn logs, and sometimes they actually used trees tall enough to hammer the cross bar into or upon.

When the Lord Jesus hung on the Cross, He was the fulfilment of a man, any man, and every man being punished for a sin deserving death. And which sins deserve death? Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death". Every human deserves death, and that is why no human escapes death.

But Jesus hangs on a tree not for His own sin, but for the sin of others. He was accursed of God, because He bore the sins of the world.

He was the Grand Substitute for Adam's sin, the one taking the punishment, and the death and the pointlessness of Man's sin in His own sinless Person on the Cross. Here was the Author of Meaning, bearing the vanity, the pointlessness, the emptiness of what we brought. Here is the Holy One, the Lawgiver, bearing the pain, the sorrow, the brokenness that we brought.

And if he were carrying the full weight of the curse on His shoulders, what would be appropriate as symbol of what He was doing? That He be on a tree, crowned with thorns, the ultimate symbol of the curse. On His very head, thorns pressed into His brow, as thorny piercings nails Him to a Tree. And the entire time He is on the Cross, He is carrying the thorns, bearing the curse until the payment is paid in full.

Why could Jesus take away the curse that Adam brought? You see, the Second Adam was also a perfect man, without sin. And the Second Adam also faced Satan in temptation, not in a perfect Garden, but in a barren wilderness. And there Satan also offered Him independent power, and glory, if He would abandon being submitted to God.

But the Second Adam passed the test. He had refused the satanic crown. And once he had passed the test, He was qualified to pick up the crown of thorns, pick up the Curse, and place it upon His innocent Head.

Even though the Roman soldiers made a crown of thorns and pressed into into His head, they were only ironic agents of a much deeper truth. Jesus had already chosen the crown of thorns. He had voluntarily placed it on His own head. He had accepted the pain, pointlessness, punishment of the

curse on Adam and on creation, and paid it in full.

This is why Isaac Watts wrote:

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?

So did He succeed or not?

III. The Curse Conquered By Christ

²⁸ After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!" ²⁹ Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put *it* on hyssop, and put *it* to His mouth. ³⁰ So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. (John 19:28–30)

When Jesus shouted the word "It is finished", it was a victory cry. It is a Greek construction that was used by artists when they finished a masterpiece. It was a phrase also used by accountants when debts had been settled. Completion, settlement, payment. In those words, the exhausted Jesus knew that He had successfully suffered the full justice of God. He had successfully offered up a perfect life in exchange for cursed sinners. There was victory. The Lamb prevailed.

What does this mean for the curse? Paul tells us in Romans 8.

¹⁹ For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; ²¹ because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. ²³ Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:19–23)

Here Paul speaks about creation under the curse: subjected to futility. It groans and labours. The whole world is filled with the sadness of decay, disease, pain, and death. But now comes the promise of it being delivered from bondage. It will be freed into glorious liberty. When? At the same moment when the children of God (v 19, 21) are freed from their cursed bodies, at the return of Christ. When the sons and daughters of Adam are redeemed, then the curse on their home is removed. The curse will be greatly turned back at the start of the millennial kingdom, and completely removed when the New heavens and the New Earth are created.

No more let sins and sorrows grow
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

Try to picture this world, described in Isaiah:

⁶ "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the

bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. ⁹ They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6–9)

There will come a day, when the destruction and futility, and pain, and emptiness will be removed, when human flourishing on this earth will take place unhindered to the glory of God.

³ And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. (Revelation 22:3)

But some people want to skip to the uncursed world and forget why it was cursed in the first place. They want the good news of Christ becoming the curse and removing the curse without really understanding why it all happened in the first place. Lions laying down with lambs, children playing with snakes, diseases removed, long life restored, these are only the by-products, the effects, the most external signs of the curse removed. At the heart of the curse was a war between God and the crown of His creation: mankind. Man was God's trusted ally, man was God's choice partner to rule this world. When we struck out for independence, the curse was God striking us for our treachery, our betrayal of trust, our rebellion. God gave us a world to rule for Him, and we wanted to steal it and rule it for ourselves.

So even though Jesus pays for the curse for all mankind on the cross, the way back is one at a time. One person at a time, one individual at a time must decide: are you going with the first Adam or the Second? Are you going with independent life, life lived for self, and try to just make the best of a cursed world? Or will you go with the second Adam, by admitting you were wrong, and are wrong, that's you have been part of the rebellion, part of the striking out for autonomy. Admit you have been on the wrong side and turn back to God. Ask for forgiveness. See there is the Creator wearing the thorns to give you new life. But not without repentance. Not without you dropping your pride and self-righteousness and self-love.

Jesus died for you with a death you cannot die. But there is a kind of death you must die with Him. You must die to your own independence. Forsake, starve, turn from a life of self-rule. That's what brought the thorns in the first place. And then embrace the King in His humility as your Lord and Saviour.

There are some who do not want to embrace Jesus as the suffering Saviour with a crown of thorns. They want a glorious leader. Even now, they are attracted to the rich of this world, the beautiful, the powerful, the celebrities. They want that kind of leader. They want to go straight to Jesus the king of glory. As the hymn puts it:

The head that once was crowned with thorns
is crowned with glory now;
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty victor's brow.

But this is the rule. If you reject Him now when He is unrevealed to the world, known now by the crown of thorns and as a man of sorrows, then you cannot have Him as a glorious King on your side. You will have Him as a King, but one punishing those who would not submit to Him. If you wish to enjoy an uncursed world ruled by a glorious Saviour, it is because you accept the king with a crown of thorns now. You accept that you brought the thorns, and that your own sin deserves to be torn on a bed of thorns. But you humbly accept a king bearing the curse, that you, too might rise with Him and enjoy a world made for humble, submitted sons and daughters of Adam..

Once again, the wisdom of men is foolishness with God, and the foolishness of God is true wisdom. The crown of thorns was actually the perfect symbol for Jesus to wear on the cross. Today, the decision is yours to see that crown of thorns the way the Roman soldiers meant it, or the way God meant it. A piece of flippant mockery. Or a picture of the good news of salvation.