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The Mocked King

Throughout the world, churches are reading the resurrection account, singing songs of praise for Christ's triumph over death, and are filled with excitement and hope at what all of this means because of the resurrection of Christ. And yet, there is much more to Easter than just an empty tomb!

We look at the professional athlete, the great musician, the accomplished brain surgeon, or the CEO and, depending on our background; we secretly admire them and say that they have the "good life"- maybe even the easy life. And yet, we fail to realize that behind each of these "glamour" positions is countless hours of preparation, sacrifice, and struggle. And the resurrection of Christ is no different. Behind the resurrection of Christ and the empty tomb there is unimaginable suffering, trial, hardship, and sacrifice. In fact, it is my belief that we cannot fully appreciate the meaning of Easter without at least a limited understanding of the cost that lies behind the empty tomb.

As we consider the death and resurrection of Christ, I want to discuss with you Easter and the King of Kings, as it relates not to Christ as the Victorious King who conquered the grave but to Christ as the mocked King, who suffered at the hands of many men! Matthew 27:27-31 describes some of the suffering that Christ underwent in His final hours.

Matthew 27:27-31, "Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. 28 And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 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."

The setting of this passage is found in John 18, Thursday evening when Jesus was before Annas.

John 18:12-13, "So the Roman cohort and the commander, and the officers of the Jews, arrested Jesus and bound Him, and led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year."

After Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane by a mob numbering from 200 to over 600 men, He was brought first to Annas who at the time was one of the most powerful Jews in Palestine. Leon Morris explains:

There is little doubt but that ... the astute old man at the head of the family exercised a good deal of authority. He was in all probability the real power in the land, whatever the legal technicalities. (Morris 1995, 749)

Morris' words are well founded. Annas had been the high priest from 6 A.D. to 15 A.D., when he was removed from office by Valerius Gratus, Pilate's predecessor as governor.¹ Annas's title, however, was more than a mere courtesy. Many Jews, resentful of the Romans' meddling in their religious affairs, still considered Annas to be the true power (especially since according to the Mosaic law high priests served for life; cf. Numbers 35:25). Further, after his removal from office, five of Annas' sons and one of his grandsons served as high priest! And at the time of Christ's crucifixion, he was the "father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year."

So Christ was brought before Annas. In his presence, Jesus was questioned, beaten, and then sent to Caiaphas who was the High Priest that year. Matthew 26:57-68 gives us the story from Thursday evening to early Friday morning.

Matthew 26:57-68, "And those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest [Joseph Caiaphas had been appointed high priest in 18 A.D. by Valerius Gratus, the same Roman prefect who had deposed his father-in-law Annas three years earlier. He remained in office until 36 A.D. when the Romans removed him. Caiaphas's tenure as high priest was one of the longest in the first century, which reveals his cunning and opportunistic nature. That he proposed killing Jesus to preserve his and the Sanhedrin's power (cf. John 11:48) demonstrates his utter ruthlessness], where the scribes and the elders were gathered

together [this was the Sanhedrin and so the Supreme Court of the Jewish Judicial system]. But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find *any*, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, and said, 'This man stated, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days."' And the high priest stood up and said to Him, 'Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?' But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, 'I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said it *yourself*; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, 'He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?' They answered and said, 'He is deserving of death!' Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, 'Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?'"

Before Caiaphas, Jesus underwent a rather uncharacteristic trial for a Jew. Barring a few exceptions (of which the trial of Christ was one), the Jewish system of justice at the time of Christ was incredibly fair. It went to great lengths to protect the innocent, preserve justice, and insure a just and fair trial for all. In fact, the Jewish legal system held that an accused man was guaranteed the right to

- (1) A public trial,
- (2) Defense counsel,
- (3) Bring forth evidence and witnesses in his own behalf, no matter how damning the evidence and testimony against him might be, and
- (4) Conviction only on the testimony of at least two reliable witnesses. In fact without two witnesses, the accused could not be condemned EVEN if in his own defense he accidentally betrayed his innocence!
- (5) A person who knowingly gave false testimony would suffer the punishment the accused would suffer if found guilty (Deuteronomy 19:16-19).
- (6) A sentence of death could not be carried out until the third day after it was rendered. During this time, the members of the court were to fast!

There were many more procedures all designed to uphold the principle, "The Sanhedrin is to save not destroy life!" Yet all of these rules and procedures were thrown out in the case of Jesus.

- (1) Christ was unjustly accused, tried, sentenced, and condemned... in one night!
- (2) There was no probation time before His death much less fasting!

Now because the Jewish Sanhedrin did not have the power of the sword (the penalty of death was in the hands of Rome), Caiaphas delivered Christ over to Pilate, yet only after we read that the Jews, "...spat in His face and beat Him with their fists, and others slapped Him." (Matthew 26:67).

This brings us to Friday morning when Jesus was brought before Pilate.

Matthew 27:1-2, "Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death; and they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor."

The record of Christ's first appearance before Pilate is found in Luke.

Luke 23:1-7, "Then the whole body of them arose and brought Him before Pilate. And they began to accuse Him, saying, 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.' And Pilate asked Him, saying, 'Are You the King of the Jews?' And He answered him and said, '*It is as you say.*' And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes, 'I find no guilt in this man.' But they kept on insisting, saying, 'He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, even as far as this place.' But when Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time."

Standing before Pilate, Jesus underwent another trial, this time Roman. And yet at this point, Pilate is on shaky ground. Recall, after Rome conquered a region governors/procurators were placed over the region for two stated purposes:

- (1) To raise taxes and
- (2) To keep the Roman peace, which the Caesars took rather personally!

This is the reason for the charges the Jews leveled against Christ before Pilate.

Luke 23:2, He supposedly "forbid Jews to pay taxes to Caesar."

Luke 23:5, He was "stirring up the people."

Pilate could see that neither was the case. Yet he could also see that stirring in his kingdom was a potential nest of trouble if a riot broke out. Accordingly, he opted to give the problem to someone else, but who? Ah... Jesus was from Galilee and the Roman overseer of Galilee, Herod Antipas, just so happened to be in Jerusalem that night on account of the Passover. Pilate therefore opted to send Jesus to him.

Luke 23:8-12, "Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him [Herod Antipas was Herod the Great's son. He ruled Galilee from 4 BC to 39 AD. Herod Agrippa would follow him.]. And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing [In other words, Jesus failed to entertain him]. And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been at enmity with each other."

Under the scrutiny of Herod, Christ was questioned at great lengths. Yet and again, because the Lord didn't entertain Herod, Christ eventually was treated with contempt. And once again, because He was

a “hot potato” Jesus was sent back to Pilate. Herod wanted nothing to do with Jesus.

Matthew 27:11-26, “Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘*It is as you say.*’ And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He made no answer. Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?’ And He did not answer him with regard to even a *single* charge, so that the governor was quite amazed. Now at *the* feast the governor was accustomed to release for the multitude *any* one prisoner whom they wanted. And they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, ‘Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?’ For he knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up. And while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.’ But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. But the governor answered and said to them, ‘Which of the two do you want me to release for you?’ And they said, ‘Barabbas.’ Pilate said to them, ‘Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?’ They all said, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ And he said, ‘Why, what evil has He done?’ But they kept shouting all the more, saying, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of this Man’s blood; see *to that* yourselves.’ And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood *be* on us and on our children!’ Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified.”

Though having the power to save Christ’s life, Pilate (more concerned for his political career than justice) consented to His crucifixion (this would have been between 8:00 and 10:00 in the morning). And as before, prior to being led away, Jesus once again was scourged! Now all of this serves as the background for Matthew 27 where we learn of the scorn that Christ received following His trial under Pilate² - which brings us to the scorn that Christ suffered.

Matthew 27:27, “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him.”

The “Praetorium” (or Antonia’s Fortress) was a fortress/tower on the northwest side of the temple. It served as the headquarters for the Roman force in Jerusalem. Notice that those gathered were a “whole Roman cohort” which would have numbered 640 men, a rather large group, yet understandable on account of Rome’s military policies. Rome typically conscripted soldiers from among its occupied countries. Yet, because most men would not fight against their own countrymen, they were frequently sent to neighboring regions that spoke the same or similar language.

In view of this, the soldiers in our passage most likely would have come from the province of Syria. As such, they NOT ONLY would have spoken Aramaic but they would have been acquainted somewhat with Jewish culture, and thus would have well understood the claims of Christ but they would have had a strong dislike for Jews. And thus, the size of this gathering is quite understandable, the opportunity to participate in anti-Jewish prejudice would have been a welcomed treat. Now, Matthew 27:31 gives the purpose behind this gathering.

Matthew 27:31, "And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him."

This verse contains the key word for this section: "mocked." During His trial, when Christ was nothing more than a condemned criminal, the soldiers began their "mocking" activity. The word "mock" literally means "to play as a child with someone" and thus could be translated as "to dance around," "to sport with," or "to jest." In the New Testament its primary reference is associated with Christ. Now notice, though the soldiers do not know Jesus (they again most likely are Syrian), yet they obviously understood the claims that Jesus made- that He was the Messiah, the King of the Jews. And we know this because the soldiers' activity reflected a contempt for Jesus' claim that He was the Messiah [see, Christ's death was NOT a case of mistaken identity; He was crucified as Messiah. His death rather was a case of rejection, Jesus was not the kind of Messiah the Jews wanted]! In this regard, notice seven elements of the soldier's scorn.

Matthew 27:28a, "And they stripped Him..."

By this time, Jesus would have been wearing only His seamless inner garment. And thus, it would have been this garment that protected the deep wounds that Christ received from His scourging in John 19. And thus, as a way to demean Christ further, the soldiers took His remaining clothes off.

Matthew 27:28b, "...and put a scarlet robe on Him."

This most likely was the outer robe of a soldier which was used for warmth on cold nights. Its rough underside would have produced much pain against a back that had been ripped apart by the whip of a scourge. Describing the scourging that Christ received before this in John 19:1, Dr. John MacArthur wrote this:

The whip used for scourging had a short wooden handle, to the end of which were attached several leather thongs. Each thong was tipped with very sharp pieces of metal or bone. The man to be scourged was tied to a post by the wrists high over his head, with his feet dangling and his body taut. Often there were two scourgers, one on either side of the victim, who took turns lashing him across the back. Muscles were lacerated, veins and arteries were torn open, and it was not uncommon for the kidneys, spleen, or other organs to be exposed and slashed. As would be expected, many men died of scourging before they could be taken out for execution. (Dr. John F. MacArthur, Matthew 24 - 28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series 1989, 244)

Matthew 27:29a, "And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head..."

It is unknown as to the type of thorn used for this crown (there are many types of thorns in Palestine even to this day). Regardless of the identity, it is clear that the soldiers were intent on increasing Christ's physical and moral pain. In fact, as the crown was forced on Jesus' head, his appearance would have been disfigured even further as rivulets of blood would have started to run down His face, neck, and body!

Matthew 27:29b, "...and a reed in His right hand..."

Continuing in their mockery, the Soldiers placed the royal symbol of authority and power in the hand of Christ- a scepter in the form of "a reed." And thus, just as the coins in Christ's day bore a picture of Caesar with a scepter, so now Christ bore a scepter! Yet, Christ's was not the scepter of power, but of weakness, humility, and shame!

Matthew 27:29c, "...and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews.'"

This phrase was a takeoff of "Ave, Caesar"- the words spoken by the soldiers of Rome in adoration of their king. Now notice, John 19:3 records that these troops literally "...continued to come up to Him saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'" In other words, he soldiers continually approached Christ man-by-man, group-by-group and bowed before Him mouthing these contemptuous words!

Matthew 27:30a, "And they spat on Him..."

This probably occurred as each man rose from their mock-kneeling. And what was the significance of this action? In Christ's day, there were many diseases which were often disfiguring and whose stench was nauseating. As such, to spit at someone was one of the strongest acts of revulsion and rejection in that day.

What an incredible scene. Here the Creator of the world submitted Himself to the sinful mockery of the creature. Yet, this would be short lived. In fact, Philippians 2 tells us that after this humiliation, Christ was exalted to the highest place in all of creation. The next time these soldiers would see Christ would be upon their death when they themselves would be judged by the Lord who this time held in His hand the scepter of almighty God!

Matthew 27:30b, "...and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head."

The soldier's contempt became violent as they smashed the "royal scepter" over the head of Christ. Recall, the scepter of a king represented his sovereignty and power. Thus to take a king's scepter and strike him was the height of repudiation and scorn. It would be like saying, "*What kind of a king are you? Where is your authority? Where are your soldiers to protect you?*" Notice also that the way the Greek reads, once again the soldiers did this repeatedly. And thus, as each soldier spat upon Christ, they grabbed the "mock-scepter" and beat Him on the head. John 19 reveals that the soldiers also repeatedly hit Christ in the face with their fists (like the Temple Guards in Matthew 26:67)!

Brothers and Sisters, as we have gathered in this place to worship Christ, let us not miss the fact that that first Easter was NOT a day surrounded by family, lilies, chocolate eggs, and Easter baskets. RATHER, it was a day of insult, pain, suffering, and eventual death! It was a day of unmitigated mockery! Now as horrible as this is, we must ask these questions: What was the significance of Christ's suffering here? And thus, what is the significance of this passage for our lives today?

Matthew 27:28, "And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him."

Purple was the color of royalty. However, because the soldiers did not have that on hand, they settled for the closest color, “scarlet” (which in a faded robe would have closely resembled a faded purple, cf. Mark 15:17; John. 19:1). While it was far from the soldier’s intent, the use of scarlet had incredible symbolism in the mind of the Jew, listen to the promise of God fulfilled by the cross.

Isaiah 1:18, “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the Lord, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.’”

Do you see the significance of the soldier’s mockery of Christ? Though they were participating in an act of folly, the soldiers nevertheless in God’s providence clothed Christ with the color that represented “Sin” in the Old Testament! In other words, that Christ wore a scarlet robe should serve as a vivid reminder of the nature of His work as the “King of the Jews!” Through the suffering that led to the cross and at the cross itself, Jesus clothed Himself in the scarlet sins of the world in order that those who believe in Him might be free from their sin! Christ was “...offered once to bear the sins of many...” (Hebrews 9:28).

1 Peter 3:18, “...Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God...”

And so, do not read over this passage too quickly, for it is a graphic reminder to all who celebrate Easter as to its meaning: As Christ was clothed with the scarlet robe of the Roman soldiers, that was but a precursor of the scarlet robe of OUR sin that He was soon to bear on the cross!

2 Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

1 Peter 2:24b, “...by His wounds you were healed.”

But what of the crown?

Matthew 27:29, “And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head...”

Once again, what these soldiers did in their sin had profound implication when we bear in mind the Old Testament. When we think of the “crown of thorns” we immediately are brought back to the fall of Adam, the representative of mankind.

Genesis 2:16-17, “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’”

As you know, Adam ate of the tree and thus we read this:

Genesis 3:17b-19, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from

it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

When Adam sinned against God, a curse came upon the land such that man’s labor now would be difficult. Now this “curse” was not just physical, it was also moral!

Galatians 3:10, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.’”

Now the important thing to remember in this context is that in the Bible the symbol of this “curse”- both the physical and moral death with which we live- is the THORN!

Genesis 3:18, “Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field.”

Truly, every time Adam saw a thorn he would have been reminded of the curse that rests upon this earth on account of his sin! Now as we read in our text that Christ wore a crown of thorns fashioned by sinful man, we must take note that it was but the foretaste of THE “crown of thorns” that He soon would bear on account of the curse that lies upon this world- a curse He bore in His body that we might be delivered from it...

Galatians 3:13, “Christ 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.’”

What a picture that is painted here for us! As we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, which is the focus of every Lord’s Day, let us not miss the true meaning that surrounds Easter. Easter is a day of triumph as Christ broke the power of Death and triumphantly rose from the grave. And yet, it also is a day surrounded by suffering, agony, hardship, and death, ALL ON ACCOUNT OF OUR SIN, that we might live! Through His death, Christ, took upon Himself our sin. Bore in His body the curse of our rebellion. It is this truth that reveals the relevancy of this day for each of your lives. That a morally upright teacher died on our behalf 2000 years ago at the hands of ruthless people is something to rejoice over- yet with little significance to our lives! BUT, that GOD (1) came to the earth, (2) suffered in the place of man thus freeing man from their sin and the curse of the Law, and (3) died and rose again thus breaking the power that death held over mortal man. THAT IS SOMETHING WHICH SHOULD EVOKE GENUINE PRAISE!

End Notes

¹ He could still properly carry the title of high priest (vv. 15, 16, 19, 22), in much the same way that former presidents of the United States are still referred to as president after they leave office.

² Matthew obviously is not writing linearly.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 8, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church