

## *This Jesus*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 21, 2021.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 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!" 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. As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 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 by casting lots. Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way (Matthew 27:27–44).<sup>1</sup>

The true identity of Jesus is a theme woven through the Gospel of Matthew. To the reader, Jesus is introduced from the beginning. From his royal lineage to his virgin birth to his commissioning baptism, we know what his Father confirms, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). This we know, and yet Matthew consistently introduces us to those who don't, those without eyes to see the works or ears to hear the words of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

For example, Israel's leaders vacillate in their profiling of Jesus, from blasphemer to law breaker to traitor. Whoever they think he is leads them to one unified conclusion: he must be destroyed. Of course, the irony is that he is the Messiah they have anticipated, but when he comes, they hate him. They literally hate him for who he is.

When Jesus is tried and sentenced to death in Caiaphas's court, he is delivered from Israel's court to a Roman one. The judge is Pontius Pilate the governor; the jury is a riotous crowd. Though Pilate seeks justice, mob rule prevails: The most innocent man to ever live will be crucified. But what happens between Pilate's court and Jesus's death is telling. Concurrently, human depravity and Jesus's identity are revealed, as he is mocked as Monarch, crucified as Christ, and slandered as Savior.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

## **Mocked as Monarch**

While the angry mob enables the leaders of Israel to get their way, Jesus is actually tortured by the Romans, a “battalion” of soldiers to be exact. Despising the Jewish race, religion, and culture, an assemblage of between 120 up to 600 soldiers, seize the opportunity of Jesus’s prosecution as an opportunity, a depraved and grotesque sport in the Praetorium. Jesus provides an outlet for what was likely pent-up frustration, in which a merciless and bloody scourging was just the beginning. Before them is the embodiment of their disdain, the so-called “King of the Jews.”

Added to this is the charge against Jesus, as one challenging the authority of Caesar, the Roman Emperor. An alleged attempt to usurp Caesar’s honor and authority further fans the flame of disgust but also engenders a nationalistic pride. Brutal humiliation becomes the privileged play of the patriotic. In parody, they kneel before the would-be emperor, not crying “Ave, Caesar!” but instead “Hail, King of the Jews!”

Despite the depravity of the moment, it is rich with irony. While they attempt to humiliate the humble, unknowingly they *are* confirming the King, beginning with a royal robe of scarlet. It is draped upon Jesus’s shoulders as he is “despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3), but what the soldiers do in mockery points forward to the magnificent. For example, in recounting his vision of heaven, the Apostle John sees not the mockery of a Monarch but a King upon a white horse, clothed in a scarlet robe, not of purple dye but of blood. Accompanied not by a Roman battalion but by “the armies of heaven,” John says, “From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:11-16). The contrast is striking, one before the cross, the other after: Two different scarlet robes, one mocking the other magnificent, both worn by the King of kings.

Continuing their mockery, the soldiers twist together a crown of thorns, press it upon Jesus’ head, and place a flimsy cane into his hand. Conjecture about the type of thorny vine used for the crown is irrelevant. What is relevant is their intent: They are inflicting pain as they mock King Jesus, further depicting the world’s opinion of our Lord. I think Michael Card captures this brilliantly when he asks:

And why did it have to be a thorny  
Crown pressed upon his head?  
It should have been a royal one  
Made of jewels and gold instead.

It had to be a crown of thorns  
Because in this life that we live.  
For all that would seek to love,  
A thorn is all the world has to give.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Card, “Why,” Song Lyrics, accessed February 20, 2021, <http://www.songlyrics.com/michael-card/why-lyrics/>.

While what the world gave Jesus was a crown of thorns, it is not the only crown to rest upon his head. Again, as John recounts from his vision, “[The King’s] eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems” (Rev. 19:12). Similarly, the cane or reed placed in Jesus’s hand is surely meant to be his royal scepter, connoting regal rule. They are mocking Jesus’s supposed sovereign rule, as if it is as flimsy as the reed in his hand. But what they mock in ignorance, they will realize one day in reality, as King Jesus will reign not with a reed but a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). In that day, he will not be mocked.

Having adorned Jesus with a scarlet robe, a crown of thorns, and a reed for a scepter, they then kneel before him, not in worship but derision, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” It is not an act of reverence, but remarkably ironic, as this is not the only day they will bow the knee before Jesus. On Judgment Day, every knee shall bow, not mocking but worshipping. On Judgment Day, every tongue shall confess, not saying, “Hail, King of the Jews,” but “King of kings and Lord of lords.” On Judgment Day, no soul will cry out, “Ave Caesar!”, but heaven and earth will rejoice that King Jesus will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

Let this serve as an encouragement to us today. Jesus’s true identity is not based on what people think about him or how they label him. The world does not enjoy the privilege of telling us who Jesus is. Jesus enjoys that privilege alone, as his true identity is not defined by merciless mockery or seeming stupidity but according to his own self-revelation as the Word of God. Make no mistake about it: The world may have an uninformed opinion, a distorted perception, a personal denial, or they may not even know his name, but one day we will rejoice with all the saints, proclaiming, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever” (Rev. 5:13).

### **Crucified as Christ**

From his persecution in the Praetorium, Jesus is led away to be crucified. Severely weakened by the torture, Jesus cannot even carry what was likely a wooden cross beam. He had previously told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24), but on that day Jesus cannot carry his cross, nor are his disciples there to help him. Instead, a bystander is compelled to help, Simon, not a son of Israel but a man of Cyrene.

From the governor’s seat of judgment, Jesus proceeds to the place of execution, Golgotha, which in Aramaic means “Place of a Skull.” It is a place of purpose: death. As a means of death, crucifixion was uniquely Roman, intended to inflict as much suffering and shame prior to death. The dying were to suffer as much as possible for all the world to see.

Perhaps as a means of mercy, Jesus is offered wine “mixed with gall,” probably serving as a mild narcotic. Tasting it, Jesus will not receive it, as the psalmist prophesied, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink” (Ps. 69:21). He will go sober to the cross, desiring nothing to distort his senses, “for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). Despite the violence of his death, Jesus knew its greater purpose. “What dominated his mind,” John Stott writes, “was not the living but the giving of his life.”

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In a description that seems almost ill-placed, Matthew tells us that once Jesus has been secured upon the cross, the soldiers gamble for his garments. It is seemingly irrelevant until we remember the prophetic words of the twenty-second psalm: “they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (Ps. 22:18). Such is the intricacy of Scripture; such is the callous concern of the depraved mind and unregenerate heart. God sovereignly orchestrates the atoning sacrifice of his Son, while man trifles with dirty clothes.

The cross of Christ is a foreign concept to the world, meaningless except in its finality, or perhaps curious in its novelty. Jesus of Nazareth died upon a cross. But if the one who died was also the Christ, the Anointed One, in fact the Son of God, then the Roman instrument of suffering and shame became the cross of Christ, an atoning altar for sin. Upon the cross, Jesus died a sinner’s death yet committed no sin. The purpose of his death was not his sin but yours: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Therefore, Jesus’s death upon the cross was not an accident, or an unfortunate casualty of an innocent man. No, as Isaiah puts it, “it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt. . .” (Isa. 53:10). What God the Father ordained God the Son accomplished: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

### **Slandered as Savior**

For such a sacrifice we should expect to hear,

All glory, laud, and honor  
to you, Redeemer, King,  
to whom the lips of children  
made sweet hosannas ring.  
You are the King of Israel  
and David's royal Son,  
now in the Lord's name coming,  
the King and Blessed One (“All Glory, Laud and Honor”).<sup>3</sup>

Instead, with vilifying voices Jesus is slandered in stereo, the guilty beside him, the belligerent below, in ensemble they deride the Divine. First, they twist and manipulate his words, saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” It is a false charge but safe to shout at the feet of the suffering. He will in fact come down from the cross, dead, a corpse to be buried, but as he said, on the third day his temple will be resurrected.

Accompanying the false charge, the chief priests, the scribes, and elders malign our Lord in the form of a conditional offer: “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God

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<sup>3</sup> Theodulph of Orleans, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, trans. John Mason Neale (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, inc., 1990), 235.

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deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” What they offer is nothing but an insult, but with their insult they unknowingly speak the truth. He *is* indeed the eternal Son of God. He *does* indeed trust God, who *can* indeed deliver him, but chooses instead to deliver the unworthy. He *did* indeed save others and *could* have saved himself, but as John Stott puts it, “He could not save himself and others simultaneously. He chose to sacrifice himself in order to save the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps referencing the sign that read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews,” after Jesus’s resurrection Peter preached to the Jews, saying, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). Confronting their sin, he testified to the resurrection and then stated this glorious truth: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). This Jesus! This Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 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 (Phil. 2:6-11).

This Jesus, King of kings, Lord of lords!

Though mocked as Monarch, every knee shall bow before him in heaven and earth. Though crucified as Christ, every tongue shall confess that he is Lord. Though slandered as Savior, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. What is the opposite of slander is praise, of which our Savior is worthy. So could our anthem be:

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer’s praise  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of His grace.

My gracious Master and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad,  
The honors of Thy name.<sup>5</sup>

This Jesus!

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<sup>4</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ: 20th Anniversary Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Charles Wesley, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, inc., 1990), 235.