

# The King of the Jews (Matt. 27:27–31)

*By Jacob D. Gerber*

This short section depicts the mystery of the gospel in the stunning paradox of Jesus as a king—albeit a mocked and mistreated king. In every verse, we see the glory of Jesus’ kingship through the veil of his humiliation, which reminds us that Jesus’ reign as king is inseparable from his suffering at the cross. It is not merely that Jesus must undergo suffering in order to come out on the other side into his glory, but that Jesus’ glory is inseparably bound up in his sufferings. Or, to put this another way, Jesus reveals his glory in the darkness of Golgotha as well as the radiance of his resurrected glory. *By mockery and mistreatment, Jesus is crowned as the King of the Jews.*

## The Mocked King (Matt. 27:27–29)

At a basic level, this story offers a contrast between Christ’s estate of humiliation here and his subsequent estate of exaltation. At a grander level, we see how “the kingdom of Christ ought not to be estimated by the sense of the flesh, but by the judgment of faith and of the Spirit...so as to obliterate all the dishonor of the cross” and to “lead us to the contemplation of his glory.”<sup>1</sup> This paradox begins immediately in this section: “Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him” (v. 27). The “whole battalion” could be as many as six hundred soldiers, “although the number varied.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Matthew’s theme of the over-the-top response to Jesus in his crucifixion continues, building on the great, armed crowd who came to arrest Jesus (Matt. 26:47, 55) and the binding of Jesus to deliver him to Pilate (Matt. 27:2). None of these things were necessary for a prisoner who offered no resistance to his captors or even to the charges against him, yet our Lord’s silence only seems to enrage his enemies all the more. Nevertheless, if we step back and look at the picture Matthew paints for us, we see a remarkable scene: here is Jesus entering into a royal palace, surrounded by a great host. We have here a dark foreshadowing of the coming of the Son of Man in his glory, with all his angels with him, when he will sit on his glorious throne (Matt. 25:31). The hosts indeed gather before the king—but here, to mock and mistreat him.

The paradox continues with the change of clothes for the prisoner: “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” (vv. 28–29a). Importantly, this kind of change of clothes has deep biblical roots in the Old Testament to signify a change in fortunes for a prisoner.<sup>3</sup> This theme is especially

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:291.

<sup>2</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 830.

<sup>3</sup> For this paragraph, see Samuel Emadi, *From Prisoner to Prince: The Joseph Story in Biblical Theology*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 81.

pronounced with Joseph, whose brothers stripped from him his colorful robe before selling him into slavery (Gen. 37:23), and whose garments were taken from him by Potiphar’s wife, who then used those garments to accuse him falsely of assault (Gen. 39:13). But, Joseph’s fortunes changed when Pharaoh summoned him from prison to interpret his dream, at which point the Egyptians “changed his clothes” before bringing him before the Egyptian king (Gen. 41:14). Further, when Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream correctly, Pharaoh exalted him to his right hand by giving Joseph Pharaoh’s own signet ring, by clothing him “in garments of fine linen” and setting “a gold chain about his neck” (Gen. 41:42). Finally, when Joseph reconciles with his brothers, he gives each of them a change of clothes, and Benjamin five changes of clothes (Gen. 45:22).

Here, the soldiers strip Jesus in order to clothe him with a royal, scarlet robe.<sup>4</sup> Morris writes, “Matthew is describing a highly ironical situation; the soldiers went out of their way to produce trappings of royalty as a means of ridiculing one who was to be crucified as a King, whereas he really was King a fuller and wider sense than they had any idea of.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, this is something deeper than mere irony or parody, since by these actions, the soldiers are *installing* Jesus as king in a way that they could not understand. We see the significance most clearly in the crown of thorns that the soldiers set upon Jesus’ head: “thorns and thistles are mentioned in Gen. 3:18 in connection with Adam’s fall. Here in Matt. 27:29a and its parallels Jesus is pictured as bearing the curse that lies upon nature, in order to deliver nature and us from it.”<sup>6</sup> Through humiliation and suffering, Jesus is entering into kingship over a sin-filled and cursed creation. By his sufferings, he will redeem it.

To complete the scene, the soldiers mock Jesus by pretending to be devoted citizens: “And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’” (v. 29b). By these words, the soldiers “in fact express profound truths.”<sup>7</sup> As Hagner writes, “These immature soldiers could not know that one day they would again kneel before and confess as exalted Lord (Phil 2:10–11) the very one whom they now sarcastically hailed as the ‘King of the Jews.’”<sup>8</sup> Even the title, “King of the Jews,” was an absurd and belittling title in the eyes of these Romans, who serve the great Emperor. Similarly, the reed scepter mocks the kingdom of Jesus, since a reed is often a symbolism of weakness and instability in Scripture (1 Kgs. 14:15; 2 Kgs. 18:21; Isa. 36:6; 42:3; Ezek. 29:6–7; Matt. 11:7; 12:20). Nevertheless, Matthew has been emphasizing that Jesus is indeed the rightful heir to the throne of David since the very first verse of this Gospel.<sup>9</sup> Yet, this is not merely a parody, but the reality. Jesus has begun to enter into his reign as king—albeit of a cursed, weak, and absurd kingdom.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 15:17, 20 and John 19:2, 5 have a “purple robe.” Matthew’s “scarlet robe” is likely a description of the reality of what Jesus wore (“the nearest look-alike that might reasonably be thought to be available to the soldiers...a standard Roman soldier’s cloak.”), whereas Mark and John are recording what the scarlet robe was intended to symbolize—the luxurious purple robe of a king. (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1182.)

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 711.

<sup>6</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 959.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 710.

<sup>8</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 831.

<sup>9</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 641.

## The Mistreated King (Matt. 27:30–31)

In addition to the crown of thorns, the next section develops the idea that Jesus enters into his reign *over* creation by the mistreatment *from* that creation. In a general sense, the people who are mocking and spitting upon and striking Jesus are human beings who were created through the Son (John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). Matthew brings out this idea through the image of the soldiers taking the reed (which was the mock scepter of Jesus' kingdom) and using it to strike Jesus on the head (v. 31). This detail is a vivid depiction of the means by which Jesus must enter into his reign as king: through mistreatment from his creatures and the wider created order. Hendriksen is probably right that, every time the soldiers hit Jesus' head, "the thorny spikes are driven deeper into the flesh."<sup>10</sup> Thus the scepter and the crown of thorns become emblematic not only of Jesus' reign over a cursed creation, but also the instruments of afflicting Jesus with the suffering by which he will redeem his people and all of creation itself.

Finally, the horrible scene ends, although not as a relief to Jesus, who moves from the frying pan into the fire: "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" (v. 31). Here, we seem to come back to the Joseph story. Like Joseph, Jesus is stripped of his colorful robe as he begins the rest of his suffering all the way to the depths of the pit—for Joseph, it was the pit of the prison, but for Jesus, this descent will culminate in his burial. For both, this descent is the precursor to each man's eventual glorification. Whereas Joseph was set at the right hand of Pharaoh, Jesus will be set at the right hand of his Father.

## Discussion Questions

1. What was the "governor's headquarters" (v. 27a)? Why is it fitting for Jesus to be brought now into an imperial palace? How many soldiers would have been included in the "whole battalion" (v. 27b)? How does this picture foreshadow how King Jesus will one day be surrounded by his glorious hosts? How does this detail contribute to the overall theme of how Jesus is crowned king as he prepares to go to the cross?
2. What does the Old Testament background (especially in the life of Joseph) suggest about the significance of how Jesus is stripped of his clothing and clothed with a scarlet robe (v. 28)? How are the thorns of Jesus' crown associated with the curse over all creation (v. 29a; see Gen. 3:18)? How does a reed scepter suggest weakness (v. 29b)? How would the Romans have felt over a "King of the Jews" (v. 29c)? How does Jesus' exaltation fit with his preparation for the cross?
3. What does Jesus' being hit over the head with his own scepter suggest about the means by which Christ will enter into his kingdom (v. 30)? Against the backdrop of Joseph's life, what is the significance of Jesus' being stripped of his colorful robe in v. 31? How did the Lord lead Joseph through humiliation on his way to exaltation and glory? How does that story inform the way that we see Jesus as he is led out to be crucified (v. 31)?

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<sup>10</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 960.

4. What should we make of Jesus' being crowned king over a cursed, weak, and absurd kingdom? How does Christ's glory shine through in the darkness of his crucifixion? Does this horrifying scene lead you to reverent worship of our Savior? How might you pray for the increase of Christ's kingdom ("Thy kingdom come!"; see *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #191)? How does this scene help us to refocus the way that we see the suffering and shame of the church in the world?