

HATS AND CROWNS

“A crown is merely a hat that lets the rain in.”

Frederick the Great

*“Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns
All music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing
Of him who died for thee,
And hail him as thy matchless king
Through all eternity.”*

Crown Him with Many Crowns
Traditional church hymn¹

I love wearing my hat.

I wear it everywhere.

It is a simple black baseball cap with the words “U.S. Air Force Vietnam Vet” displayed prominently on the front, along with a representation and colors of the Vietnam Service Medal ribbon.

I particularly enjoy wearing the hat while we are at North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Almost every day, someone will say “thank you for your service,” or “welcome home” here. People in this part of the country appear to genuinely appreciate the personal sacrifice that goes with military service. In contrast, back in the Washington D.C. area, wearing the same hat, even on a daily basis, almost no one bothered to thank me for my service to our county.

That explains a lot.

In this part of the country, veterans are acknowledged at shows; elsewhere, athletes refuse to stand for the national anthem (to the point

¹ I love hearing this hymn in church. The song’s author is Matthew Bridges (written 1851), the alterer is Godfrey Thring (1871), and the tune is *Diademata* (Elvey). The song appears in some 780 plus hymnals in churches around the world. See, *hymnary.org*.

that television broadcasts of professional football games have almost stopped showing the playing of the national anthem altogether).

Patriotism has become non-politically correct.

“Sigh.”

Here in North Myrtle Beach, I try not to miss a weekly men’s Bible study held in an upper room at Boulineau’s grocery store. On a typical Wednesday morning a gathering of over fifty men—from all denominations—gather to sing worship songs, study the Word, and fellowship. Keith Almond leads the discussion and does an outstanding job. (Keith and I have become good friends and meet regularly at a local breakfast restaurant “The Golden Griddle.” When I signed my book for Keith, I called him a “warrior for the cause of Jesus Christ.”)

That he is.

His single-minded focus is summed up in the phrase prominently displayed up front at every meeting: “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

That *He* is.

Last week, Keith turned over the floor to any veteran in the group who wanted to take a few minutes to share about their military service experience. Several men shared their experiences; two or three wounded in action, a Marine commander, a forward air controller, a Navy vet, and several others.

I shared two stories from my time in Vietnam. The first one was about me sitting in a sling seat with a cargo plane full of coffins when aboard the “first available” aircraft coming back stateside for emergency medical leave. Each of those lifeless young men, I explained, had their lives, dreams, and relationships cut short—war is awful. My second personal account was about being on a mission along the North Korean coast when our electronic officers in the back (the Ravens) received messages indicating hostile aircraft coming after us. The pilot put down the landing gear and flaps as our plane dropped out of the sky like a rock. I will never forget the sounds of our accelerating descent, the bolts and rivets popping as the airframe of our RC-135—built by the cheapest bidder—was stressed beyond any manufacturer’s requirement. Time slowed down. When I looked to my left, I saw young airman (many on their maiden flight) vomiting uncontrollably. I began bargaining with

God—"it can't end like this," I pleaded. The pilot pulled out our aircraft just above the waters of the Yellow Sea (he subsequently received a special commendation for the deed). I remember sitting at our station and being plugged into an intercom with my fellow Chinese linguist James Kirby. We both laughed. A laugh like I've never experienced before or since. We had cheated death!

We, as believers in Jesus Christ, should laugh in such a way ourselves; we who were dead in sin have been made alive by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ at the cross. Instead, far too often, we sit in dead churches with our spiritual straitjackets wrapped around us ...

A couple Wednesdays ago, I was leaving Boulineau's after our meeting—wearing my Vietnam veteran's cap—and, in the process, was thanked for my service by a cashier and a worker as I walked toward the exit. Their remarks made me feel proud. Just as I approached the automatic doors at one end of the grocery store, I felt the gentle nudge of the Spirit. "You know Jeemes," a soft inner voice whispered, "I wore a hat as well. A crown of thorns."

I was jolted to spiritual reality by that thought.

It is not my hat, my writings, my books, my teachings, the pride I feel when my service is acknowledged by others, my eloquence (if any) in telling my story that counts: it is all about the blood shed by the Jesus at the cross that matters. Anything else anyone sees in me will burn up like rubble.

I need to be reminded of that from time-to-time.

As a result of that spiritual encounter that morning, I determined to learn more about the crown of thorns that the Roman soldiers placed on my savior's head. The account appears in three of the four gospels. As Matthew describes the scene in his gospel:

"Then the [Roman] soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium (the governor's residence) and gathered the whole garrison around Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. **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!’ Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. 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.”²

At the time, Jesus was beaten so badly that He was almost beyond recognition. He endured that for each of us.

Biblical scholars are divided about what regional thorn plant constituted the plaited and woven “crown” (Greek *acanthus*) of thorns placed on Messiah’s head. Rabbinical books mention more than twenty Hebrew words that signify thorny plants in the Bible. Some commentators say it was the “Spina Christi” (botanical name *Zizyphus Spina Christi*), a plant very common in the East. The plant’s spines are small and sharp, its branches soft, round, and pliable, and the leaves look like ivy, with dark, shiny green color, making them very adaptable to the mocking purposes of the soldiers. Others have designated the *Palirus aculeatus* or the *Lycium horridum*. Still others say it was the “Nubk” (*Zizyphus lotus*), a plant particularly suited for mockery and pain, with its bright leaves and strong thorns. This plant is common on the shores of Galilee but less prominent in Jerusalem.³

In the Apostle John’s Revelation of Jesus Christ, the last book of the Bible, there is a description of Jesus Christ in the heavens, riding a white horse, and preparing to return to earth. “His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were “many crowns.”⁴

He alone is worthy to wear the “Victor’s crown.”

In the time to come, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess to the one wearing that crown...

Are you ready?

² Matthew 27:27-31. (New King James version)

³ In writing this paragraph, I have relied on the excellent discussion of “Crown of Thorns” by Henry E. Dosker, in *biblehub.comms* of

⁴ Revelation 19:12 (New King James version)