

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

EASTER MORNING, 1965 vii

WHY A CROWN? 1

WHY A GARDEN? 5

WHY THE THORNS? 11

WHY A WAR? 21

WHY A SOLDIER? 27

WHY A SACRIFICE? 31

WHY ONLY *ONE* KING? 37

WHY A PLAN? 41

WHY A WOUNDED MESSIAH? 51

WHY THE MOCKING? 59

WHY THE CROWN OF SIN? 63

WHY THE *CORONA OBSIDIONALIS*? 67

IN THE GARDEN 71

IT'S ALL FOR YOU 75

ABOUT THE AUTHORS 80



INTRODUCTION

EASTER MORNING 1965

*The story is forever
engraved on my heart.*

Bodie Thoene

It was a story I was never meant to know. My mother's sorrow—the story of a battle lost and a war that was won. The truth was a personal wound, profound and deep, yet Mama bore it with tremendous dignity throughout her long and wonderful life.

“Why don’t I have a grandpa to come to school on grandparent’s day?” I had asked her when I was in first grade. “How did your Pop die?”

“Pop died of...it was his heart,” Mama had answered me.

Sooner or later, I suppose it was inevitable that the facts would come out. I was the first of all the kids in our family to know. I did not speak of it to anyone for fifteen years until the day Mama sat my siblings down and told them what had happened to her father.

I learned the truth on Easter morning, 1965. I was fourteen when I visited my grandfather’s grave during my first trip to Akron, Ohio, with my mother and father.

The cemetery where Pop was buried was like a garden. Groups of people in bright Easter clothes, like bouquets of living flowers, encircled the last resting places of loved ones.

So many flowers. So many broken hearts. So many memories.

A life-sized stone cross in a shelter

portrayed the suffering of Jesus. Spikes pierced His clawlike hands and twisted feet. His agonized gaze turned heavenward as if the sculptor had captured the moment Jesus cried out, “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

The crown of thorns was shoved deep into the flesh of his torn brow. The plaque above His head read: “King of the Jews.”

Mama paused and bowed her head to pray briefly at the foot of the cross. It was as if the picture of Christ’s suffering somehow gave her strength and courage to lead my father and me to where Pop was buried.

Even after twenty years she found the place easily. “Here.” Tears filled her eyes as she knelt and brushed away grass clippings from his name. “Hello, Pop.”

All the wonderful stories Mama had told us about her Pop came to my mind. Pictures of the tall, handsome man in his white straw hat came to life for me. Suddenly I realized that Pop was more than just a name in

Mama's stories. Pop had been a real person. Her daddy. He had been someone she had loved very much.

"I haven't been back here in twenty years, but I think of him every day," Mama said quietly as she adjusted a small American flag in the ground and laid down a woven wreath of yellow roses. "Bodie, he would have loved you. He was the kindest man...the kindest...a poet...like you." Her voice trailed away. Then she linked arms with my father and said lovingly, as if to introduce him to her father, "Pop, if only...if only you could have met my husband, Tommy. And our little Bo. Your other grandchildren are home in California. Pop, I have such a wonderful life. I'm really happy. Like you wanted me to be."

The engraving on the black granite stone identified Pop as a veteran of World War I. Other than that, there was only his name, birth date, and the day, month, and year of his death, twenty years before, in 1945.

As we stood there quietly, I did the math

between Pop's birth and death. "Mama! He was only 46," I remarked, surprised that Pop had died so young. "You're almost the age he was when he..."

She nodded as my father put his arm around her shoulders. Mama replied, "I never thought of that. I've lived longer than my pop. He was young, wasn't he?"

"Wow," I said. "A heart attack so young?"

My father shifted uncomfortably at my words. I sensed, as I had many times before, that I did not know the whole story of my grandfather's death or why Mama left the memories of Akron behind to make a new life in Bakersfield, California.

Mama answered in a whisper. "No. Not a heart attack. It was a long, fierce battle. And in the end, Pop died...of a broken heart. The war—so much suffering and loss all around us. The world, his life, was so harsh. He lost hope."

Suddenly, the reality of her words came crashing in on my consciousness.

Pop, the kindest man...gentle, good...the heart of a poet...my mother's dear Pop...

After a long silence she clasped my hand. We walked slowly back to the shelter, where the crown of thorns on the head of the suffering Jesus seemed to be the emblem of all suffering.

“You understand what I mean, don’t you?” Mama asked.

I swallowed hard and nodded. Only at the foot of the cross could I dare to ask, “What really happened?”

She shared only a few of the tragic details. The war. Pop’s crippling illness. Her mother’s courage. The end. There would be much more she would reveal over the years as I grew to adulthood, and we shared our hearts with one another. But that morning she kissed the top of my head, hugged me, and looked up into the face of Jesus.

Her voice did not tremble when she spoke, though her eyes brimmed with emotion.

“Twenty years ago, after Pop’s funeral, I stood right here and I asked God about suffering. Every day life seemed to be an unending battle, a war no one could win. So many wonderful young men we loved died on distant battlefields. Then Pop...here. I looked up at the crown of thorns and asked God why Jesus, such a kind Savior, had to wear a crown of thorns. *Why?* I asked. *Why is there such terrible suffering and sadness in the world? In our own lives?* Life seemed so unfair even for the Son of God. A crown of thorns? Why should it be? We were created to live in a joyful place. Created to live in a perfect garden. God never meant for there to be thorns in His creation.”

Even at my young age, I knew she was somehow speaking of her own suffering and the suffering of my grandfather. I clasped her hand as if she were, at that moment, my sister.

Gaze fixed on Jesus, she lifted her chin. “It took me twenty years of searching after

Pop died to find the answers to my questions. It took twenty years for me to finally understand why Jesus wore that crown of thorns. It means something, you know. It really, really means something.”



WHY A CROWN?

*What kind of crown
are you seeking?*

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”
VERSE 1, WORDS BY MATTHEW BRIDGES, 1852

SEEKING #1 . . .

When you think of a *crown*, what images come to your mind? A magnificent headpiece, glittering with gold, rubies, and diamonds? Something that a king or queen would wear? Or perhaps an artifact in a museum?

Most of us associate the word *crown* with royalty. A king or queen wears a crown as the emblem of his or her authority, a visible expression of the right to reign. In ancient times, a crown was also a symbol of royalty, but it had a much broader use than that. Crowns—coronets and wreaths called *coronae*—represented all kinds of distinctions. They were awarded to honor high achievement in many fields: political, athletic, and military.

Greeks and Romans sometimes bestowed golden crowns, but most often these *coronae* were formed of vines and leaves. In the Greek Pan-Hellenic games, the original prizes to the victors were made of olive leaves, pine needles, or even wild celery. Can you imagine today's

Olympic athletes being excited about such a crown?

Throughout history there have been all sorts of crowns: crowns for beauty and crowns for achievement, crowns fairly won and crowns obtained by dishonesty and corruption.

You see, it's all about being #1. Human ambition—the inner drive to obtain a “crown”—has not changed since time began. We all desire to achieve some kind of recognition, and that desire is driven by needs for respect, approval, wealth, and/or power.

What do you desire the most? To own the newest gadget or the hottest car? To be known as a shrewd business person? To be admired for your physical appearance? To win the trophy for best athlete? To have others say, “You’re the best mom/dad I know”? All of these “crowns” make us feel good, but when you get right down to it, they take root in the soil of pride—to be the best, above all others.

No wonder our eyebrows raise when we hear about a truly heroic action, motivated by courage and self-sacrifice. Something that truly *deserves* a crown of highest honor.

In ancient times, the wreath conveying the greatest honor was the *corona obsidionalis*. It was similar to our American Medal of Honor. Unlike other awards for noteworthy achievement, the *corona obsidionalis* was always presented on the battlefield, where the heroic action occurred. So it was always made from whatever grew on the field of battle: vines, grass, weeds, etc. It was awarded to the officer who saved a besieged army from destruction. To someone who delivered many soldiers from certain capture or death. To someone who turned defeat into victory, a cursed situation into a cause for blessing.

The *corona obsidionalis* was the most treasured crown of all. And it would play a pivotal role in reversing the choices that the first man and woman made in the Garden of Eden, our very first home....