Crown (4735) (stephanos from stepho = to encircle, twine or wreath) was a wreath made of foliage or designed to resemble foliage and worn by one of high status or held in high regard.

The stephanos was literally an adornment worn around the head as a crown of victory in the Greek athletic games, this reward being given to the runner who crossed the goal first, to the disc thrower with the longest toss, etc. Apart from recognition of athletes and winners of various kinds of competitions, in the Greco-Roman world, the awarding of a crown or wreath signified appreciation for exceptional contributions to the state or groups within it. The recipients were usually public officials or civic-minded persons serving at their own expense.

Stephanos was used metaphorically to refer to a community of believers who exist as proof of a worker’s success (1Th 2:19, 20 - see notes 1Th 2:19; 20). Here stepanos is that which serves as adornment or source of pride.

Stephanos was the name of a godly martyr in Acts (see verses below).

Vine - A â€“ (Strong's #4735 â€“ Noun Masculine â€“ stephanos â€“ stef'-an-os ) primarily, "that which surrounds, as a wall or crowd" (from stepho, "to encircle"), denotes (a) "the victor's crown," the symbol of triumph in the games or some such contest; hence, by metonymy, a reward or prize; (b) "a token of public honor" for distinguished service, military prowess, etc., or of nuptial joy, or festal gladness, especially at the parousia of kings. It was woven as a garland of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle, or olive, or in imitation of these in gold.

In some passages the reference to the games is clear, 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8 ("crown of righteousness"); it may be so in 1 Peter 5:4, where the fadeless character of "the crown of glory" is set in contrast to the garlands of earth. In other passages it stands as an emblem of life, joy, reward and glory, Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; James 1:12 ("crown of life"); Revelation 2:10 (ditto); 3:11; 4:4,10: of triumph, Revelation 6:2; 9:7; 12:1; 14:14 (Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words)

Stephanos is used 25 times in the NT. Study the uses below...

Matthew 27:29 And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

Mark 15:17 And they dressed Him up in purple, and after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

John 19:2 And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and arrayed Him in a purple robe...5 Jesus therefore came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold, the Man!"

Acts 6:5 And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmeand Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch...8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

Acts 7:59 And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Acts 8:2 And some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.

Acts 11:19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.

Acts 22:20 'And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.'

1 Corinthians 9:25 And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.
Philippians 4:1-note Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

1 Thessalonians 2:19-note For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?

2 Timothy 4:8-note in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

James 1:12-note Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

1 Peter 5:4-note And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Revelation 2:10-note 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 3:11-note 'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.

Revelation 4:4-note And around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads...Re 4:10-note the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

Revelation 6:2-note And I looked, and behold, a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him; and he went out conquering, and to conquer.

Revelation 9:7-note And the appearance of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle; and on their heads, as it were, crowns like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men.

Revelation 12:1-note And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;

Revelation 14:14-note And I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head, and a sharp sickle in His hand.

Stephanos should be clearly distinguished from another Greek word diadema (1238) which refers to a kingly crown.

Stephanos is used 29 times in the Septuagint (LXX) (2Sa 12:30; 1Chr. 20:2; Est. 8:15; Job 19:9; 31:36; Ps. 21:3; 65:10; Pr. 1:9; 4:9; 12:4; 14:24; 16:31; 17:6; Song 3:11; Isa. 22:18, 21; 28:1, 3, 5; 62:3; Jer. 13:18; Lam. 2:15; 5:16; Ezek. 16:12; 21:26; 23:42; 28:12; Zech. 6:11, 14)

In the first use of stephanos in the NT, Matthew says that "after weaving a crown (stephanos) of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews! (Mt 27:29)

Earlier Paul had used the verb form (stephanoo) reminding Timothy that "if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. (NIV, see note 2 Timothy 2:5)

The stephanos was the only prize ancient Olympic athletes received and thus it was cherished as a great treasure. How much more should we as believers "run with endurance the race that is set before" (He 12:1-note) us, knowing that the Olympic athletes "do it to receive a perishable wreath (stephanos) but we an imperishable." (1Co 9:25-note)

TDNT has a lengthy note on stephanos...

The crown, as a wreath placed around the head, is a sign of life and fertility, and perhaps also a symbol of light. It has a place in the cultus and supposedly wards off evil. The closed crown is used in magic. The crown expresses joy and honor, but also sorrow. It acknowledges excellence.
II. Nature. The simplest crown consists of a bent twig or of two twigs tied together. Wreaths of grass, leaves, or flowers also occur. The Dionysus cult uses ivy, oak, and acanthus, Neptune and Pan wear wreaths of fig leaves, and Zeus of laurel. Soldiers wear crowns at triumphs, and victors wear laurel or olive wreaths. The myrtle signifies love. Roman magistrates wear gold crowns, and Etruscan crowns, also used at Rome, are of precious stones and golden oak.

III. Use.
1. The Cultus. In cultic acts priests wear various forms of crowns. Aeneas crowns his brow with twigs when he first treads Roman soil and prays. Crowns are placed on sacrifices and altars, and are even offered in sacrifice. Images are crowned when dedicated to cultic use and on the feasts of the gods. The crown expresses reverence; Empedocles takes it as a mark of veneration when crowned.

2. Oracles. Crowns evoke true dreams. The person who delivers the oracle wears a crown. When Creon comes back crowned after consulting the oracle he is hailed as a messenger of joy. Roman frescoes depict crowned prophetesses.

3. Processions and Feasts. Crowning takes place in relation to prayer-processions. On the New Year feast at Rome houses are adorned with crowns or wreaths. Animals are also crowned or garlanded at various feasts.

4. A Sign of Salvation and Protection. Various examples show that crowns are viewed as signs of protection. Thus Tiberius wears a laurel wreath during thunderstorms. Wreaths are put at the entrances to houses. Crowns also serve as a means of protection and as a mark of veneration in the invocation of gods or demons in magic.

5. The Mysteries. Mystagogues bear myrtle branches in the Eleusinian mysteries, and neophytes in the Isis mysteries. A crown is handed to the mystagogue in the dedication ceremonies of Mithras.

6. Political Life. Cultic and political life are closely related, hence it is natural that those who hold national office should be crowned. When politicians give orations in Athens they wear wreaths as a sign of immunity. The Roman emperor, his family, the priests, and state officials all wear crowns in processions.

7. The Games. Held in honor of the gods, sporting festivals culminate when the victors, who struggle hard to win, are crowned with wreaths of laurel, olive, or ivy. The herald calls their names, and the names of their fathers and towns, and then hands over the wreaths. The ceremony ends in their homes, which also bear wreaths. In the final rites they offer their wreaths to the deity.

8. The Army. The Spartans put on crowns before doing battle, perhaps in connection with sacrifice and as a sign of protection. In the Roman army the general wears a crown to purify the troops before battle. The goddess of victory is depicted with a crown, and there are crowns for the victors, whether of grass, oak leaves, or laurel. An ancient Roman custom is to offer prisoners for sale with crowns on; this possibly derives from a Germanic practice of sacrificing prisoners.

   a. A Sign of Joy and Respect. Various examples illustrate the use of the crown or wreath as a mark of joy or respect.

   b. Weddings. It is natural that there should be crowning at weddings. Thus we have depictions of brides with crowns, and the guests at the wedding feast also wear crowns.

   c. Symposia. Wreaths adorn the participants at banquets and the ensuing symposia, which are held in honor of various gods. The wreaths express festal joy but also serve to cool the head during drinking. Wreaths are also placed on the bowls and vessels and on the walls of the rooms where the feasts are held.

10. The Cult of the Dead. A common custom is to put wreaths on the dead, on the bier, and on the grave. Permanent wreaths are carved on gravestones and funds are set up for regular adornment with wreaths. The wreaths honor the dead but also protect them against demons. Plato hands down an idea that in Hades there will be a symposium for the righteous at which they will be adorned with crowns. The mysteries promise initiates that in the hereafter they will be adorned with crowns and will enjoy the company of the blessed. (Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Eerdmans)

Barclay adds that stephanos had the following associations in the ancient world...
(a) the victor’s crown in the games. Smyrna had annual games which were famous all over Asia. As in the Olympic Games, the reward of the victorious athlete was the laurel crown. The Christian can win the crown of victory in the contest of life.

(b) When a man had faithfully performed the work of a magistrate, at the end of his term of office he was granted a crown. He who throughout life faithfully serves Christ and his fellow-men will receive his crown.

(c) The heathen world was in the habit of wearing crowns, chaplets of flowers, at banquets. At the end of the day, if the Christian is loyal, he will have the joy of sitting as a guest at the banquet of God.

(d) The heathen worshippers were in the habit of wearing crowns when they approached the temples of their gods. At the end of the day, if he has been faithful, the Christian will have the joy of entering into the nearer presence of God.

(e) Some scholars have seen in this crown a reference to the halo or the nimbus which is round the head of divine beings in pictures. If that is so, it means that the Christian, if he is faithful, will be crowned with the life which belongs to God himself. (The Daily Study Bible Series)

As John said: "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1Jn 3:2). In this life it may be that the Christian’s loyalty will bring him a crown of thorns, but in the life to come it will surely bring him the crown of righteousness.

Stephanos of course gives us the English name Stephen, the first NT martyr, "the crowned one". How fitting that the "crown" of the laurel wreath was awarded to the one who finished a race. So the crown is to the finisher, 'Stephen' who watched the heavens open (Acts 7:55 56) as his life leaves and says "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59) That is a man who "loved His appearing"!

The kingly crown by contrast is diadema, (diadem) which is only associated with the Lord, for example describing the appearance of the Lord Jesus returning as the King of kings upon Whose "head are many diadems" (Re 19:12-note), His return marking the final defeat of the antichrist at the end of the Great Tribulation.

Scripture also mentions a

- crown of life for "a man who perseveres under trial" (James 1:12-note)
- the unfading crown of glory (1Peter 5:4-note) for those who "shepherd the flock of God" (1Pe 5:2-note),
- our hope or joy or crown of exultation referring to believers whose life we have had a role (1Th 2:19, 20- see notes 1Th 2:19; 20, cf Php 4:1-note), and
- a wreath (crown)...imperishable for those who run in the Christian race and are not disqualified (1Co 9:24, 25, 26, 27-note)

The crown of righteousness is a phrase which in the present context is most likely the Greek construction referred to as genitive of apposition, the crown that consists in righteousness and is also the reward for righteousness.

Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament - Crown: Stephanos (Strong's 4735) Crown; diadema (Strong's 1238) - We must not confuse these two words, which are both translated "crown." In classical literature Stephanos does not denote the kingly or imperial crown. Instead, it refers to the crown that symbolized victory in the games, civicworth, military valor, nuptial joy, and festal gladness. A Stephanos was woven of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle, olive, or gold leaves, which imitated these plants, and of flowers such as violets or roses. A stephanos was a "wreath" or "garland" but never the emblem or sign of royalty.

A diadema was a "token of kingdom," a white linen band or fillet that encircled the brow. The phrase peritithenai diadema ("to put on a crown") commonly indicated the assumption of royal dignity. In Latin only the "diadema" is the "mark of kings." Selden's comments on the distinction between "crowns" and "diadems" also agree with this.

However those names have been from ancient time confounded, yet the diadem strictly was a very different
thing from what a crown now is or was; and it was no other than only a fillet of silk, linen, or some such thing. Nor appears it that any other kind of crown was used for a royal ensign, except only in some kingdoms of Asia, but this kind of fillet, until the beginning of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

Another passage in Plutarch confirms this distinction. The kingly crown offered by Antonius to Caesar is described as “a crown [diadema] woven with a wreath [stephano] of laurel.” Here Stephanos refers to the garland or laureate wreath that is woven into the diadem proper. Indeed, according to Cicero, Caesar was already coronatus (that is, wreathed, which is equivalent to estephanomenos) as a consul when the offer was made. This distinction helps to explain Suetonius’s version of the same incident. Someone placed “a laurel wreath [coronam] bound with white bands” on Caesar's statue. The tribunes did not command the removal of the corona (wreath) but of the fascia, or diadem, which alone suggested Caesar's traitorous claim to kingship.

The accuracy of the distinction made in the Septuagint and Apocrypha between diadema and Stephanos may be seen by comparing the passages in 1Maccabees where diadema is employed and those where Stephanos appears. Compare these with Isaiah 62:3, where Israel shall be "a crown [Stephanos] of glory" and "a royal diadem [diadema]."

In the New Testament, Paul always used Stephanos to refer to the conqueror’s, not the king’s, crown. Although 1Peter 5:4 does not necessarily allude directly to the Greek games, it still contrasts the wreaths of heaven that never fade with the garlands of earth that quickly lose their beauty and freshness. It is unlikely that other New Testament passages that use Stephanos refer to the Greek games, for there was a long-standing Jewish antipathy to them as idolatrous and profane. To have used imagery that referred to the prizes awarded at these games would have repelled, not attracted, the Jewish members of the church. In those passages the Stephanos, or the "crown [Stephanos] of life," is not the emblem of royalty but of highest joy and gladness and of glory and immortality. On the three occasions where John referred to kingly crowns, he employed diadema. Revelation 19:12 depicts Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, with the words "on his head were many crowns." This phrase would be difficult to understand if the crowns were similar to those worn by present monarchs, but the meaning is immediately apparent if they are "diadems," the narrow fillets that encircle the brow. The "many diadems" will be the tokens of Christ's many kingdoms-earth, heaven, and hell (Philippians 2:10). Satan, the usurper of these kingdoms and of their honors, has his own seven diadems (Revelation 13:1), but Christ will rightfully assume his lordship. This may be illustrated by the earthly example of Ptolemy, king of Egypt. When he entered Antioch in triumph, he set two "crowns," or rather "diadems" (diademata), on his head, the "diadem" of Asia and the "diadem" of Egypt (1 Maccabees 11:13). In Diodorus Siculus (1.47) we read of a queen "having three kingdoms on her head." The context plainly shows that these are three diadems, the symbols of a triple royalty.

The only occasion where Stephanos may refer to a kingly crown is Matthew 27:29 (cf. Mark 15:17; John 19:2). The soldiers mocked Jesus' royalty by placing a crown of thorns (stephanos akanthinos) on his head. The nature of the woven materials, perhaps the Juncus marinus (rush from the sea) or the Lycium spinosum (a prickly thorn bush) would make the word diadema inappropriate, though this word was fit for the purpose the soldiers had in mind. (Trench's Synonyms of the New Testament)

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As we daily present our "members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification" (Ro 6:19- note) we are working "out (our) salvation" (Phil 2:12-note) and this process equates with sanctification or experiential righteousness. At the completion of our life Christ's righteousness will be perfected in us. To say it another way, when death ends the process of sanctification and we enter glorification, the experiential righteousness is consummated in perfect positional righteousness. When we have finished our course, we will receive the unfading crown of righteousness from the Lordâ€™s Himself, the righteous Judge. So here the crown Paul is referring to is the righteousness of the Redeemer granted in full perfection to the glorified believer, for as John writes "when He appears, we shall be like Him." (1Jn 3:2-note), glorified and eternally clothed in His perfect righteousness.