

## *Behold, Your King Is Coming*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 14, 2020.

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee” (Matthew 21:1–11).<sup>1</sup>

As Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem the crowd grew from large to “huge.” His presence could not be ignored, nor is it. His approach to the capital city is also not without preparation. As he arrives on the outskirts of Bethphage, located on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, Jesus sends two disciples into the village, where they will find by appointment “a donkey tied, and a colt with her.” They are to be and brought to Jesus with only the justifying words, “The Lord needs them.” As the word “Lord” is used here, it is the equivalent of saying, “God needs them.” And, indeed he does.

Both animals are brought and Jesus is seated upon the colt with less than two miles to go to Jerusalem. This is a curious detail, because nowhere else do we read of Jesus’ riding an animal. He apparently walked everywhere he went. So, why would he decide to ride a young donkey into Jerusalem, when he had walked everywhere else? To further complicate the question, traditionally those arriving in Jerusalem for Passover did so on foot.<sup>2</sup> So, why is Jesus riding a donkey?

As Matthew consistently reveals, Jesus is the prophesied Son of David, the heir to the throne. As David the great king rode upon a donkey, so also does the heir apparent. But Matthew couples this symbolism with a prophetic paraphrase of the Prophet Zechariah, alluding to the Messiah of Israel: “Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.” Jesus’ intent is obvious: He is the Son of David, coming in Messianic fulfillment as the King of Israel.

Such an obvious display is not lost on his entourage. In regal recognition, they begin to spread their cloaks coupled with the kingly symbol of palm branches carpeting the ascending path.

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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).

<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wn. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 776.

## *Behold, Your King Is Coming*

In royal progression, the crowds in stereo, drawing from the Hallel psalms, shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” The cries of the crowd are telling. “Hosanna” is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew or Aramaic word meaning “Save us now.” It is used here by the crowd as a form of praise directed specifically to “the Son of David,” and of course the irony of the word is fitting, as he had indeed come to save. This is joined with praise to God, using the expression “Hosanna in the highest,” as God has sent salvation in their coming King. Between these two shouts of praise, is the acknowledgment of God’s blessing upon Israel’s Messiah, the Son of David.

The demonstrations of submission and the shouts of praise carry into the city limit of Jerusalem, leading curious bystanders to inquire, “Who is this?” For all of the Messianic symbolism conveyed by the huge crowd up to this point, the answer is not veiled. They give his perceived office, actual name, city, and region: “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.” This is an interesting response. No doubt others would have shared Nathaniel’s first prejudice, when he asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). But this prejudice is long gone. They heard Jesus’ words. They witnessed his works. Who else but the Messiah could say and do what Jesus said and did?

While the citizens of Jerusalem were likely skeptical, the crowds following Jesus were not. They heard loud and clear the prophet’s word: “Behold, your king is coming.” And within the week, Jesus would be falsely accused, illegally tried, disparaged, beaten, and crucified. Rightly did Pilate’s sign read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (Matt. 27:37), but it was affixed to a wooden instrument of torture and death. The huge crowd did not protect nor carry him to David’s throne. One man buried his body in his tomb, while the disciples hid in fear.

What then are we to make of Zechariah’s prophecy? If Jesus came as the Messiah, the Christ, in fulfillment of the prophecy, in what sense did he come as Israel’s king? How could Jesus’ coming as King to Jerusalem be fulfilled in his dying there? As with many Old Testament prophecies there are two aspects to prophetic fulfillment, an aspect of *already* and an aspect of *not yet*. I want us to consider both.

### **His Coming in Service**

In considering the *already* aspect of King Jesus’ coming, let us remember his humble revelation to his disciples that he came “not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). Jesus’ life was a life of service, but to whom? First and foremost, Jesus served his heavenly Father. We recall from his childhood that he taught his mother and Joseph that he must be about his Father’s business (Luke 2:49).

In fact, Jesus said that when he spoke, the words were given by and in service to his Father (John 12:48-50). The works that Jesus did, he did them in service to his Father (John 14:31). His earthly life and work were ultimately to glorify his Father (John 17:1-4), including the Word that he gave his disciples (John 17:7-8). Jesus’ coming was in service to his Father.

And, in serving his Father, Jesus served his Father’s children. Jesus confessed to his Father, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world” (John 17:6). In

## *Behold, Your King Is Coming*

this sense, Jesus served his Father in serving us. How did Jesus serve God's children (past, present, and future)? He served us in giving us the Word of God. He who is the eternal Word said to his Father, "I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (John 17:8-9). Through the Word, all who savingly believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, in this sense, have been served by Jesus (John 17:20).

In fact, all of Jesus' life serves us, as it was a perfectly holy and obedient life. Jesus said, "for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:19). By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we are made holy because for our sake Jesus was perfectly holy. In his service to us, how did Jesus accomplish our holiness? The apostle Paul answers the question this way: "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). How was this "great exchange" accomplished? It was accomplished through his coming in sacrifice.

### **His Coming in Sacrifice**

In Jesus' ultimate act of service, he was presented by God as "a sacrifice of atonement" (Rom. 3:25 NIV). Jesus said to his Father, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book (Heb. 10:5-7). As ordained before the foundation of the world, Jesus came as the perfect sacrifice, "the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

While the shouting crowds on Jesus' ascent into Jerusalem could not fathom it, as their coming king, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). This he had previously explained to his bewildered disciples, when he said that he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). As a ransom, a price paid for the release of slaves, Christ purchased our freedom from sin and death, with his broken body and shed blood upon the cross. Yet, in securing our ransom, he also revealed himself as our king, building his kingdom not by popular opinion but through faith one soul at a time.

While sacrifice is often perceived as losing, giving up something for something better, Christ's sacrifice was actually gain. For though he was sacrificed upon the altar of the cross, though his body was buried in the tomb, he did not remain dead. For all that his death accomplished for us, it was his resurrection from the dead that secured it. Therefore, in his coming in service and sacrifice, it is in his resurrection that we understand his coming in triumph.

### **His Coming in Triumph**

Jesus' ascent into Jerusalem is often referred to as the "Triumphal Entry," and the response of the crowd certainly justifies this. However, had they known what would follow, I imagine they would have changed their tune to a psalm of lament. They could sing of their coming king but how can one rejoice in suffering and death. And yet, Christians do. In Christ's suffering, "he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). In Christ's

*Behold, Your King Is Coming*

death, “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands [was cancelled]. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). And, in Christ’s resurrection, we too live, walking in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

The Christian life is indeed a victorious life, a life of triumph, as our lives are bound up with our triumphant King. And yet, many Christians live lives of defeat rather than victory. Entrapped by “the desires of the flesh,” or “the desires of the eyes,” or “the pride of life,” or all three, many consider the triumph of Christ’s coming as yet to come rather than today. Indeed, in this life we must constantly battle the world, the flesh, and the devil, and indeed our heavenly reward awaits us. But, Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

By virtue of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and through his ordinary means of grace, we are enabled to live life as if our King has come and with confidence that he will come. Because he has come, we may live rich, meaningful, joyful lives, enjoying fellowship with our heavenly Father and his children. But there remains a *not yet* aspect of Jesus’ coming, in which he will come in final triumph. This is what the Apostle John saw,

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 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).

Gone is the King’s colt and in its stead a white horse. Gone is the image of a humble servant but now a conquering king. Gone is the fickle crowd and instead the armies of heaven. Gone is any question of who this is or of his authority, for he is coming in triumph. Behold, your King is coming: “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Every Sunday we may gather together, singing praises to our King, knowing that he who came in service, sacrifice, and triumph, will return in triumphal entry: “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17). Behold, your King is coming!