

## Humble, and Mounted On a Donkey

Matthew 21:1–11; Philippians 2:5–11<sup>i</sup>

### The Story before the Story.

The old Puritan commentator, Matthew Henry, once noted that,

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the two main hinges upon which the door of salvation turns.<sup>ii</sup>

So, while Romans clearly speaks to both of these hinges, we'll be taking a break for at least a couple of weeks to consider the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ from a different angle, beginning this morning with Palm Sunday, or what some have called, "the triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem, as Reuben read for us a few moments ago from the Gospel of Matthew.

But to understand all the dynamics at play in Matthew 21, we have to pause briefly and consider the story before the story, because while the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), all cover the events of Palm Sunday from the perspective of Jesus and those disciples who entered the city with Him by way of Bethphage and the Mount of Olives, John begins in the city itself, telling us in John chapter 12, verse 12:

<sup>12</sup> The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him... John 12:12–13  
ESV

So, the Palm Sunday parade was not a totally spontaneous event. Although there were undoubtedly people who were just caught up in the excitement, there were disciples already in Jerusalem who came out to meet Jesus, and there were others who entered the city with Him. This shouldn't come as a surprise, because not long before Jesus had been staying with His friend Lazarus, and his sisters at Bethany, just a few miles from Jerusalem, this after raising Lazarus from the dead after 4 days in the tomb. It was a notable miracle, and according to John 11, verses 45 and 46,

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. John 11:45–46  
ESV

And you'd think that raising a man from the dead, and in front of so many witnesses, would be the kind of thing that would lead Jesus' opponents to reevaluate their position, but as Abraham pointed out to the Rich Man in Luke 16,

<sup>31</sup> He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' Luke 16:31  
ESV

And they weren't. Instead, they took counsel together and according to John 11, verse 54:

<sup>53</sup> ...from that day on they made plans to put him to death... John 11:53  
ESV

and not only Jesus. As the crowds going out to see both Jesus and Lazarus continued to grow,

<sup>10</sup> ...the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. John 12:10–11 ESV

See, we sometimes think that if God would just do miracles, if He would display His power today as He did in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, then people would believe and turn to Him in faith, but they didn't even do that then. Some did, as we have read, but others refused to believe and even began to plot against the One who had performed this notable sign. It was into this mix of friends and enemies that Jesus made His way into Jerusalem on that morning long ago, and He knew it. In Matthew 20, verse 18, He took the twelve disciples aside and said,

<sup>18</sup> “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death <sup>19</sup> and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified...” Matthew 20:18–19 ESV

So, it was no accident or misunderstanding on Jesus' part regarding the mood of the ruling elites in Jerusalem, it was in fact the plan all along—the plan set in place before time that the Son of God would give Himself willingly for us and for our salvation.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in [our] place condemned He stood...

(Hallelujah! What a Savior!) and He carried this knowledge in His heart, knowing what this hour would mean, while the crowds, all unknowing sang the words of the great Hallel:

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Matthew 21:9  
ESV

### The Rest of the Story.

That much, at least, was obvious, for as they drew near to Jerusalem, Jesus sent two of His disciples,

<sup>2</sup> 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.” Matthew 21:2 ESV

Which, of course, they did, and it appears that maybe the owner of the animals, was a friend if not a disciple, because when he heard that “The Lord needs them,” he sent them along, and the disciples saddled the colt with their cloaks so that Jesus could enter the city as another son of David had done many centuries before.<sup>iii</sup> On the previous occasion, David had decreed that his son, Solomon would enter the city mounted on the King's own mule, and when he did,

<sup>40</sup> And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise. 1 Kings 1:40 ESV

So, Solomon had come to Jerusalem not as a conqueror on a warhorse, but as God's anointed servant, riding on a humble mule, and later David's greater Son, Jesus Christ, would come in similar fashion. And it had to be so, for (verses 4 and 5):

<sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup> "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.'" Matthew 21:4-5 ESV

In contrast, we have this tendency to romanticize Palm Sunday. We call it the Triumphal Entry, and we point to the crowds laying palm branches and even their coats on the road—rolling out the red carpet, as it were—to welcome their King. We look at the children who ran ahead shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David"; we hear Jesus telling the Pharisees, "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out," and we forget that immediately following, when Jesus drew near and saw the city, He wept over it,

<sup>42</sup> saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup> For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side <sup>44</sup> and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." Luke 19:42-44 ESV

### He Humbled Himself.

But even if we set aside all the things that no one but Jesus knew about that day, we have to reckon with the Scripture itself,

<sup>5</sup> "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.'" Matthew 21:5 ESV

It was not a triumphal entry, then, but a humble entry, and fully in keeping with Jesus' life up to that point. He who was in the beginning with God, and was God, became flesh.

<sup>10</sup> He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. John 1:10 ESV

As Paul wrote in Philippians chapter 2:

<sup>6</sup> ...though he was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Philippians 2:6-7 ESV

And just in case we're tempted to think that the whole "equality with God" thing was something that was added later by His followers, Jesus Himself would pray, just a few days after His humble entry,

<sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. John 17:4–5 ESV

So, if anyone tries to tell you that Jesus never claimed to be God, but was just a humble rabbi whose legacy was later co-opted by a power hungry church, don't believe them. Begotten of His Father before all worlds, Jesus was (and remains)

God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...<sup>iv</sup>

As Matthew Henry pointed out, He who was God, and as such rides upon the wings of the wind, could have summoned a cherub to carry him, yet now in his state of humiliation, he rides upon a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.<sup>v</sup> It was not worthy of the One who created and sustains the stars by the word of His power, but it was necessary, that the Word of God might be fulfilled.

### He Was Obedient Unto Death.

As Jesus would pray later that day:

<sup>27</sup> “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? **But for this purpose I have come to this hour.** John 12:27 ESV

What purpose? John 12:31–33:

<sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup> He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. John 12:31–33 ESV

Which was the point of it all. He, who was in the form of God,

<sup>7</sup> ...emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:6–8 ESV

This, for the glory of God. This, “for us men and for our salvation,”<sup>vi</sup> because God is glorified through the salvation of all those He has called by His grace, but there's more to it than that.

### Jesus, Name Above All Names.

Later this week, if the Lord wills, we will gather on Good Friday, and again on Easter to be reminded that the point of Palm Sunday was never Palm Sunday itself, but rather that Christ, might enter

once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12 ESV

But just for this morning, let's skip to the end. On Palm Sunday, Jesus prayed,

<sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name.”

And His Father replied:

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” John 12:28 ESV

And this is how. Jesus was obedient, even unto death on a cross,

<sup>9</sup> **Therefore...**

(because He was),

...God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...

Yes, but why?

...to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9–11 ESV

So, let's not get stuck on the humility of Jesus, or, worse still, on the kind of earthly glory that He received on Palm Sunday. He endured all this—He endured the cross itself—despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God,<sup>vii</sup> ruling in the midst of His enemies until the last enemy, death, is fully and finally overthrown. Then,

<sup>28</sup> When all things are subjected to him...the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. 1 Corinthians 15:28 ESV

As Calvin wrote:

Christ will then restore the kingdom which he has received, that we may cleave wholly to God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity, because a way of approach will then be opened up, from which our [weakness] now keeps us back. Thus then Christ will be subjected to the Father, because the veil being then removed, we shall openly behold God reigning in his majesty, and Christ's humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God.<sup>viii</sup>

Today, we see it by faith. One day, we will see it with our own eyes. One day, we will see Him as He is now, enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven. One day we will join that throng, falling down before the throne of God, and then we will truly worship and ascribe unto Him the glory that is His due. But even now, we are called to acknowledge that He is Lord, not merely over all (which is a strange way of saying it, I know), but Lord over **us**; Lord over you and me; Lord over every aspect and question of our life.

Acknowledging then that He is Lord, may we have the same mind now that He had then. May we humble ourselves, walk in obedience to His good and perfect will, and offer always unto Him the glory due that name which is above every other name. For,

<sup>12</sup> ...“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” Revelation 5:12 ESV

Even so,

<sup>13</sup> ...“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Revelation 5:13 ESV

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
  - ii Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1719.
  - iii Cf. 1 Kings 1:32–40.
  - iv “The Nicene Creed”, R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)*, (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2389.
  - v Cf. Henry, *Commentary*, 1719.
  - vi “Nicene Creed”, Sproul, *Reformation Study Bible*, 2389.
  - vii Cf. Hebrews 12:1–2.
  - viii John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, vol. 2* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 32–33.