

**“A King on a Donkey”**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**  
**March 24, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The rest of Matthew’s Gospel, totaling eight chapters, describes the last week of Jesus’ life. This is the most important week in the history of the world. It is a week that was predicted way back in Genesis 3, where God promised that one of the offspring of Eve would crush the head of Satan. This descendent of Eve would be God’s champion who would restore God’s creation and lift the curse put upon it. Even more significantly, he would redeem the very ones who caused the creation to go off the rails in the first place, human beings. The events of Holy Week begin with Palm Sunday, when Jesus makes clear that he is the true King. Your life will flourish only when your king is this true King.

I can imagine someone objecting by saying that they have no king. C. S. Lewis once wrote an essay making the case that having a king is an inescapable part of being a human being. “Monarchy is easily debunked. The actual record of kings is abysmal, full of tyranny of course. And yet, where we are forbidden to honor a king, we will honor millionaires, athletes, or film stars instead, even famous gangsters. For spiritual nature, like physical nature, will be served. Deny it food, and it will gobble poison.” In other words, if you don’t honor the true King, you will honor another king who will bring harm to you. God’s goal for us today is that we might see what a beautiful king we have in Jesus.

**I. Jesus Is the True King**

There is something unusual about this passage that is easily missed. For much of his ministry, Jesus tried to keep his true identity under wraps. After performing a miracle, he would often tell those benefiting from his miracle not to tell anyone else, particularly when the miracle was something astounding like raising someone from the dead (Mark 5:43). The unusual thing about this passage is that Jesus reverses that pattern here and lays claim unambiguously to being the true King of Israel.

We see this in a number of ways in this passage. The first is the allusion to at least three Old Testament passages about Israel’s Messianic King. The first one is the mention Matthew makes of the Mount of Olives in verse 1. Jesus enters Jerusalem from this mount because, according to Zechariah 14:4, this mountain was the predicted location of the Messiah’s appearance to Jerusalem. Then there is the quote from Zechariah 9:9 to explain what is happening here. **“Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey,**

**and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”** Finally, the shouts of the crowd in saying, **“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”** quote a verse from Psalm 118:26.

But there’s more to Jesus’ claim of Messianic Kingship. He knows and guides the future, indicated by his telling these two disciples what they will find when they walk up the road to the village of Bethphage. Some argue that this was not a demonstration of Jesus’ divinity, but was merely good planning, saying that Jesus had scouted things out beforehand and arranged this. While such an explanation is not overtly unfaithful to the text, I think it more plausible to read this as a supernatural event. Given the crowds around Jesus all the time, I think it unlikely that he could sneak away undetected to prearrange all this. And if he had prearranged it, it would really be more honest to speak of it in his directions to the disciples. So I would put this in the same category as Jesus telling Peter to pay their temple tax by catching a fish and finding a coin in its mouth to be used to pay their temple tax (Matt. 17:27).

We see his kingship over creation in the fact that he could ride an unbroken colt through a noisy crowd. I had horses growing up, and I know from experience what happens when they aren’t ridden—they grow more wild. This one had never been ridden. But Jesus is King over creation, and every part submits to him like it was intended at creation. Remember that Adam and Eve were made rulers over creation in the Garden of Eden. But when they sinned, humanity lost that authority to some degree. Now, the second Adam, Jesus, restores what the first Adam lost. The Great Awakening preacher George Whitefield, once asked, “Dost thou know why the wild animals fear and growl and shriek at thee?” And then he answers his question, “Because they know thou hast a quarrel with their Master!” Jesus could calm a wild animal as well as a storm at sea because he is the King.

## **II. Jesus Is a Humble King**

The purpose of this passage goes beyond demonstrating Jesus as the true King. It wants to answer the question of the kind of king Jesus is. He is a humble King, seen in his choice of the donkey for his ride. **“Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.”** You can tell a lot about a person by the kind of car they drive. If you see a woman driving a minivan packed with car seats, dried French fries spilled on the floor and toys for keeping young children occupied, it’s a clear indication that she is a mother of young children. If you see a fifty-year old man driving a fast sports car, it’s likely that he is having a mid-life crisis. If you see a young man driving a twenty-year old car with bad tires and a bad paint job, he is probably a poor student. When we see Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem, it tells us that he is a king, because kings ride and don’t walk. But it also tells us that he is a

humble king coming in peace. Had he chosen to ride in on a war horse, it would indicate that he is coming for battle.

Let's think just a little about the contrast between a humble king and a proud king. A proud king says, "Do this because I need to show you who's boss," while a humble king says, "Do this because it is the path for the best life and I love you and want good for you." A proud king insists that others die for him, while a humble king does for his people. A proud king imposes his will while a humble king patiently transforms the will of his subjects to want what is good for them. A proud king fights his personal enemies while a humble king fights the true enemies of his subjects. Jesus is entering Jerusalem to fight these true enemies of sin and Satan. These were not the enemies the Jews wanted their Messiah to fight. They say "Hosanna," which is a cry for salvation. They wanted a Messiah who would save by fighting the Romans and thus free their country from Roman occupation. When it becomes clear that Jesus will not fight this enemy, they turn against him. When Pilate gives them a choice between freeing Jesus and freeing Barabbas, they choose Barabbas because he was a fighter, an insurrectionist.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey invites a contrast with his second coming, when he comes on a war horse, not a donkey. Let me read it to you, as described in Revelation 19. **"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...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"** (v. 11-16). In Revelation 19, he comes to judge all flesh, but on Palm Sunday he came to Jerusalem in order to be judged for the sake of all men. At his second coming, he will come to expose sin. On Palm Sunday, he entered Jerusalem in order to cover up sin with his shed blood. At his second coming, he will wear many crowns on his head. On Palm Sunday, he comes to Jerusalem in order to wear a crown of thorns. At his second coming, he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On Palm Sunday, he comes to Jerusalem to be trod upon in judgment by his heavenly Father. His first coming was on a donkey, for the purpose of bringing peace to heaven as reconciliation comes between sinful and humanity and a hold God. His second coming will be on a war horse, for the purpose of bringing peace to earth by destroying all his enemies.

### **III. Jesus Is a Seismic King**

The adjective 'seismic' is suggested by the verb that is translated "stirred up" in verse 10. **"And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, 'Who is this?'"** The Greek word has as its root our English word "seismic." It means to shake or quake. Jesus has a way of shaking things up. When he will die on the cross just a few days from this entry, Matthew reports that the earth shook and the rocks were split. His resurrection from the dead was accompanied by a great earthquake. When the guards who were posted to prevent his disciples from stealing the body saw the resurrected Jesus, they were shaken to the core. The same reaction had happened years earlier when the wise men showed up in Jerusalem looking for the baby born King of the Jews. We read that Herod, along with all Jerusalem, was shaken merely by news of the birth of this baby.

When King Jesus shows up, there's a lot of shaking that takes place. He shakes up lives in all the right ways, shaking us out of our destructive loyalty to other kings. As C. S. Lewis said in the earlier quote, "spiritual nature...will be served." If you don't honor the true King, you will honor false and destructive kings. What is the most common alternate king for the average American? It is the king of self, wanting the freedom to do whatever you want to do without having anyone else tell you what to do. The problem with this is that none of us is up to that task of running our own lives. There are simply too many options, and we don't know how any of them turn out. So how do most people cope with that reality? They do so by keeping their options open as long as possible, avoiding commitment to a particular choice as long as possible. This doesn't result in freedom. It results in bondage. Freedom comes by embracing limitations, but they have to be the right limitations. Jesus, as the true and humble King, knows the right limitations, the ones that result in our freedom.

One of the ways Jesus wants to shake up your life is through submission to him as the King who alone can lead you into life. To be a Christian is to let him shake you up like this. The people in this story demonstrate this. The keepers of the donkey and its foal do so. It's easy for us to consider this a minor thing; after all, it's just a couple of donkeys, and one of them is very young. One commentator spoke like this about the value of the donkey. "Many people were so poor that a single family could not afford a donkey. A group might chip in and corporately buy one to share" (Larson, p. 282). A donkey was closer to what a pickup truck might be to a carpenter: his most expensive tool, one essential for his livelihood. So one thing it means to allow Jesus to shake up your life by his kingly authority is to take all your material goods, even the most essential, and make them available to Jesus. When the people cast their cloaks before Jesus, they were doing the same thing. A cloak was far more valuable to these people than to us. Most people only had one or two of them, and they were quite costly when considered as a percentage of income. But these costly garments were flung to the ground, indicating their desire for their king to have everything—even to trample their property if he so desired. Finally, they gave

him their praise, which requires the giving of one's heart. For Jesus to be a king means that he owns everything—all of our material goods and all of our hearts. Has your life been shaken by Jesus to the point that you can sing the words of this morning's closing hymn? "All for Jesus! All for Jesus! All my being's ransomed powers, all my thoughts and words and doings, all my days and all my hours. Let my hands perform his bidding, let my feet run in his ways; let my eyes see Jesus only, let my lips speak forth his praise."

If you're not yet at that place, let me suggest another way Jesus needs to shake up your life. We are all born with an instinct that says being a Christian means trying your best to be a nice person. The idea is that God likes "nice people" more than others who are not nice. While no one is perfect, if God wants anyone to be in heaven, he's going to have to grade on the curve and let nice people into his heaven. One can only hope to be on the good side of this "niceness" cut-off-point. Jesus wants you to know that this is a complete lie, the most burdensome lie ever told. The truth is that our entrance into heaven requires us to admit that we are not nice at all. We are by nature God's enemies. But Jesus died to suffer the penalty God's enemies deserve, so that we might be treated with the blessings Jesus deserves. You don't have to get it right, because Jesus has gotten it right for you.

One of the ways Jesus continues to shake up my life is by giving me fresh glimpses of his great love for me. I see the harm my sin does to those I care for, both in the family and in the church, and still Jesus forgives and restores. He is the King for me. I neither want nor need another.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The question asked by the crowds is one Matthew would have all of us ask. "**Who is this?**" (v. 10). With Jesus there is no middle ground. He is the King, and that means that you have only two choices with him. You can crown him or you can crucify him, but you can't merely like him. I invite you to crown him today as you trust him and honor him with your obedience.