

Chapter 84: “Behold, Your King is Coming to You”

Matthew 21:1–9

At long last, Jesus arrives at Jerusalem. In many ways, what we will read in the next few chapters is the main focus of the entire Gospel of Matthew, and the main focus of Jesus’ life. Here, Jesus comes to establish his kingdom once and for all. While the crowds in Matthew 21:1–9 wanted Jesus to establish his kingdom, they could not have imagined the way in which Jesus would go about that work. He did not come as the king that the people expected. Instead, *King Jesus came to save his people in unexpected ways.*

An Unexpected King (Matt. 21:1–5)

As we have seen at several points in this study, Matthew uses geography theologically. The locations of Jesus’ travels are not incidental to the story, but they communicate an important aspect of Jesus’ mission. Here, for the first time in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus finally arrives at Jerusalem. Donald Hagner explains the significance of the geography well: “The Galilean ministry has come to an end, and the journey to Jerusalem has been completed. Now all that remains are the events, the deeds and teaching in Jerusalem, that are preliminary to the goal and climax of the entire Gospel narrative.”¹ In this vein, it is worth thinking about the purpose of a “triumphal entry.” We might see a victorious army enter triumphantly into a capital city, or a championship sports team returning to cheering fans in their home town. Jesus’ triumphal entry suggests that he has now successfully accomplished everything in his mission to rescue the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6; 15:24) throughout Galilee, so that only one thing remains: Jesus must now go to the cross.

To prepare for the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus sends two of his disciples into Bethphage (“the village in front of you”; v. 2) to bring him donkey and a colt. Within the context of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ speech is unusually direct in his prophetic foretelling of what they would encounter (cf. Matt. 17:27).² Two features of Jesus’ instructions make the prophetic nature of his words particularly emphatic: (1) Jesus’ doubled emphasis on the immediacy of what will happen in v. 2 (“immediately”; εὐθέως; *eutheōs*) and v. 3 (“at once”; εὐθύς; *euthus*), and (2) the future tense “he will send” in v. 3.³

Specifically, Jesus tells his disciples to find the donkey and the colt, to untie them, and to bring them to Jesus (v. 2). Jesus anticipates that someone will ask questions, and Mark’s account informs us that the disciples were indeed challenged by those in the village (Mark 11:5). Regarding the instruction to say that “The Lord needs them,” scholars debate whether “Lord” refers to God the

¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 591.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 801–02.

³ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 593.

Father⁴ or to Jesus.⁵ In my judgment, the context leans toward identifying “Lord” as a statement by which Jesus refers to himself. Osborne gives two important reasons to support this claim. First, Osborne observes that Jesus has only just been called “Lord” by the two blind men in the immediately preceding passage (Matt. 20:30, 31, 33), and at multiple points earlier in the Gospel (Matt. 8:2, 6, 8, 25; 9:28; 14:28, 30; 15:22, 25, 27; 17:4, 15).⁶ Second, Osborne also draws attention to the express function of the triumphal entry: “Jesus here begins the process of overturning his ‘messianic secret’...and proclaims himself publicly as the Messiah.”⁷ While Jesus has been reticent to reveal his identity overtly previously, an important part of the climax of this Gospel comes as Jesus draws increasing intrigue and anger the more clearly he identifies himself as the Lord and Messiah.

As Matthew does throughout the Gospel, the Evangelist cites the passage that prophesied this event in vv. 4–5, from Zechariah 9:9. Lenski draws an interesting inference from the fact that Matthew cites the prophecy before v. 5, which records that the disciples did indeed do what Jesus said they should do. Thus, Matthew seems to imply that it was not the actions of the disciples that fulfilled the prophecy, but Jesus’ instructions to the disciples. Lenski then concludes, “This can have only one meaning, namely that Jesus himself knows and by his order proceeds to fulfill this prophecy. He did not fulfill it unconsciously in the way in which the Jews ignorantly fulfilled so many prophecies concerning him.”⁸

The prophecy itself makes two major points. First, the prophecy announces that the one riding on a donkey is the king of God’s people: “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you...’” (v. 5a). Second, the prophecy also explains the qualities of this king: “humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden” (v. 5b). A donkey is a “beast of burden” rather than a war horse, and this contrast becomes especially clear when we consider the military language in the next verse after the quotation: “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:10).⁹ Jesus does not enter into a city as “an armed soldier astride a war horse,” but as “an unarmed, plainly clad civilian riding a donkey.”¹⁰ To put this in modern terms, we are not seeing a decorated general in a full military dress uniform enjoying a ticker tape parade, riding on top of a tank. On the contrary, Jesus looks more like a shepherd driving in a pickup truck. The Messiah has come not to be served, but to serve (Matt. 20:28).

⁴ “Matthean usage requires that the ‘Lord’ referred to must be God rather than Jesus: ‘the Lord’ as title in this gospel elsewhere always refers to Yahweh, never to Jesus.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 776.)

⁵ “The title might refer to Yahweh—the animals are needed in Yahweh’s service. But the most natural way to take ‘Lord’ is Jesus’ way of referring to himself. This step is in keeping with the authority he has already claimed for himself and fits this late period of his ministry, when he revealed himself with increasing clarity.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 494.)

⁶ Osborne, *Matthew*, 754.

⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 751.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 802.

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 521.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 312.

An Unexpected Salvation (Matt. 21:6–9)

In v. 6, Matthew reports that the disciples did exactly what Jesus directed them to do, although (as mentioned earlier) without recording an account of the interaction between the disciples and the owners of the donkey and the colt. At this point, however, the disciples move beyond the bare instructions of Jesus by putting their cloaks on the donkey, so that Jesus sat on the donkey (v. 7). Then, we also read about how others joined into this event, apparently unbidden: “Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road” (v. 8). By these actions, they give Jesus what we would call the “red carpet treatment,” lining his path as a recognition of his importance.

At this point, it is important to reflect on the scene as it unfolds. Not only are we seeing Jesus defy expectations for the Messiah by riding upon a humble beast of burden, but Calvin has written well about how this scene draws attention to the poverty of both Jesus and the crowd:

In order to lay claim to the honors of royalty, he enters Jerusalem, *riding an ass*. A magnificent display, truly! more especially when *the ass* was borrowed from some person, and when the want of a saddle and of accoutrements compelled the disciples to *throw their garments on it*, which was mark of mean and disgraceful poverty. He is attended, I admit, by a large retinue; but of what sort of people? Of those who had hastily assembled from the neighboring villages. Sounds of loud and joyful welcome are heard; but from whom? From the very poorest, and from those who belong to the despised multitude. One might think, therefore, that he intentionally exposed himself to the ridicule of all. But as he had two things to do at the same time, — as he had to exhibit some proof of his kingdom, and to show that it does not resemble earthly kingdoms, and does not consist of the fading riches of this world, it was altogether necessary for him to take this method.¹¹

The king has no donkey, much less a war horse. The disciples have no saddle. Some of the “royal retinue” are so poor that they have no cloak and can only throw palm branches hastily cut from the surrounding trees. From a PR perspective, this entry is a disaster. Nevertheless, this entry communicates exactly what Jesus intends to communicate about his kingdom.

Finally, Matthew tells us that the crowds were shouting chants of joy for Jesus: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (v. 9). The word “Hosanna” is a direct rendering of the Hebrew from Psalm 118:25, “*Save us, we pray* [הוֹשִׁיעָהּ נָּ; *hōshi‘āh nā’*; lit., ‘Save, please’], O LORD!” We should notice that the crowds here hail Jesus as a “Son of David,” a royal title that Matthew has held before us since the very first first of the Gospel (Matt. 1:1). To be sure, it is difficult to know what exactly was going through the minds of the people as they called upon Jesus to save them and praised him.¹² Hendriksen is probably right, however, in his nuanced understanding of what they said versus what they meant: “In hailing him as the Messiah, the people were right; the Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes (Matt. 21:15, 16; Luke

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:447.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 810.

19:39, 40) were wrong. But in expecting this Messiah to reveal himself as a political, earthly Messiah the Hosanna shouters were as wrong as their leaders.”¹³

The people wanted a political leader who would lead them in the overthrow of their current oppressors, the Romans.¹⁴ Jesus’ kingdom, however, is not of this world, as he would confess before Pilate within the week (John 18:36). So, Jesus could willingly accept the praise of the people; however, he also immediately began work reforming the people in ways that were extremely uncomfortable for them (Matt. 21:12). To this day, he is still doing the same with his people—accepting their praises, while reforming their hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem in this passage (v. 1)? Where has Jesus been previously? What was Jesus doing before arriving in Jerusalem? What will Jesus do now? In the context of what we have read so far, what is unusual about Jesus’ instructions to his two disciples (vv. 2–3)? How does the prophetic certainty and Jesus’ unusually forthcoming self-description as “Lord” set up what happens in the following week?
2. What does it mean for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem (v. 5; Zech. 9:9)? What is the significance of the donkey on which Jesus rides? How does Zechariah 9:10 help us to understand why Jesus did not ride something else, such as a war horse? How does Jesus portray his kingship by this action? How does Jesus portray his humility by this action? How does Jesus portray the burden that he will bear by this action?
3. Why did Jesus need to borrow a donkey at all? Why do Jesus’ disciples place their cloaks on the donkey, rather than a saddle (v. 7)? Why are only some of the people able to put their cloaks on the path before Jesus, while “others” can only cut down palm branches (v. 8)? What does this tell us about the resources upon which the kingdom of Jesus depends? What comfort can you draw from this story for the needs in your own life?
4. What do you think the people meant when they cried out, “Hosanna!” to Jesus (v. 9)? What did they want Jesus to do as the “son of David” who came “in the name of the Lord”? If you are honest, what do you want King Jesus to do for you in your own life? How does the kingdom of Jesus defy your expectations? How is the kingdom of Jesus a better solution to your problems than if Jesus had solved them according to your desires?

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 760.

¹⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 518.