

The sovereignty of God

Palm Sunday

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At times in scripture we see that God instructed his prophets to speak his instructions to God's people. At other times God instructed his prophet to present to his people an object lesson or living example of the idea that God was trying to communicate. We find an example of this in Luke 19:28-40.

At the time of this story Jesus had been ministering to the people for almost three years. The time of His death was drawing near and most of the Jews were still choosing not to believe that He was the promised Messiah. It was the time of year to celebrate the Jewish Passover and thousands upon thousands of Jewish pilgrims had already gathered in Jerusalem. In the midst of this religious celebration Jesus presented them with a picture, where His claims of being the Christ (Messiah) would be unmistakable.

²⁸ And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'" ³² So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. ³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ And they said, "The Lord has need of it." ³⁵ And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in

the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

Luke 19:28-40 is a story of Jesus entering Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. He draws near to Jerusalem riding a colt donkey. His disciples respond by laying their cloaks on the ground in front of him and waving palm branches. The crowds praise him as they would a king.

From our perspective this seems to be a simple story of crowds of people cheering the arrival of Jesus. That is the basic truth of the story, but there is so much more when one looks more closely.

The Mount of Olives was just east of the city of Jerusalem. It was a place with sacred importance. In the book of Ezekiel, God had given the prophet a vision of God and His glory leaving and returning to Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives, the mountain to the east of Jerusalem. The location of this story being the Mount of Olives would have been significant to the people of Jesus' day.

As we continue to observe the culture of that day and the scriptures of the Old Testament, we can begin to understand much more about this story. An unused animal was often used for sacred purposes. One example can be found in Numbers 19:2, where God gives instruction concerning an animal that was to be sacrificed: ***"This is a requirement of the law that The Lord has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke."*** Christ riding on an unused colt was another message to the people about the sacredness and importance of who Christ was.

A third important detail was the type of animal on which Jesus was riding. A conquering king would enter a city riding a horse. A king coming in peace would ride a donkey (Matthew 21:2; 1 Kings 1:33-34). Jesus had not come to be an earthly, military king, who would free the Jews from Rome. He came as an eternal king that would free many from the condemnation and slavery of sin. He came in peace... the Prince of peace. Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 that had been written 500 years before:

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

In contrast to this, in Revelation 19 Jesus comes riding on a white horse as a conquering King of kings and Lord of lords.

This was another message to the people who were there that day. Yes, Jesus was coming to be King of the Jews, but not in the way that they desired. He was coming to deliver them from so much more than the Romans. He was coming to save them from themselves and the slavery of sin and eternal separation from God.

Verses 35-36 tell of how they spread their cloaks or outer robes on the road in front of the donkey that Jesus was riding. This was another way that kings were treated. In 2 Kings 9:12-13, a prophet of God proclaims a man named Jehu as king and this is what is said of the people's response, ***"They hurried and took their cloaks and spread them under him on the bare steps. Then they blew the trumpet and shouted, "Jehu is king!"*** This was another clear message in the story that Jesus was not coming as just a good teacher or a good man. He was claiming to be the promised King of kings.

In John 12:13 this same story of Jesus Triumphant entry is told and it tells how the people waved palm branches. Palm branches were another way to prepare the way of the "King". In ancient history, palm branches often symbolized goodness and victory. Some Jewish coins from the first century had palm leaf engravings with the accompanying inscription, "the redemption of Zion."¹

We also find Palm Branches as part of the worship that is described in Revelation 7:9-10:

⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

The Sovereign God had brought all of these indicators together in one place, at one time, to declare Christ as Messiah and King. In response to all of these signs, the people began to praise Jesus, quoting from Psalm 118:26, a verse with clear references to the coming Messiah that had been written in centuries before: ***"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"***

The donkey, the location, the cloaks on the road, the palm branches, and the praises of the people, all declared Jesus as the promised Messiah and a king. It was a dangerous statement to be making at that time in history since the Romans were in power, but that is who Jesus was and why he had come.

In the midst of the cheers there were Pharisees, some of the most religious Jews, who were watching the event take place. They rejected the claims of Christ's being the Messiah and called for him to rebuke the praises of the people. They told Jesus to rebuke his disciples, but He responded with these words, ***"I tell you,"*** he replied, ***"if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."***

Jesus was stating the truth that the praises of God in Jesus Christ cannot be silenced. The disciples were giving glory to Jesus because He was the Promised One from God, but the Pharisees refused to recognize who Christ was. In this brief encounter we see that it is possible to know a lot about God but not know Him personally. It is possible to be religious without having a relationship with God.

Our world is familiar with the concept of glory. We give glory and praise to athletes, actors, musicians, authors, scientists, political officials, and many others. Glory is an idea of greatness that we give much too easily these days. It is a distinction that one is better than the rest because of their ability, their achievements, or because of who they are. It is the idea of unequalled greatness.

But we must remember that even the greatest football players of the world were created by God. Musicians perform well, but God created music itself. The politicians lead nations, but in the end every nation will bow to Jesus Christ. Even scientists in their greatest discovery have only found what God had already put in place when the world began.

If we choose not to give God glory, ***"even the stones will cry out!"*** He is of infinite worth. There is no other name that will ring throughout the halls of heaven for eternity except the name of Jesus Christ. The names that our world exalts will be forgotten and fade into the past, but the name of

¹ Origin of Motif: Ancient coin from 69 C.E., http://judaism.about.com/library/1_culture/bl_coins.htm

Jesus will resound forever. The praise of God cannot be silenced and the Sovereignty of God will not be denied.

In Romans 1:20 the characteristics of the Creator can be seen by looking at His creation. Psalm 19 tells us:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

Psalm 135:6 – ***“Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.”***

Isaiah 46:9-10 – ***“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”***

Phil. 2:6-11 – ***“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”***

The praises to God cannot be silenced by governments, by sword, by threats, or by fear. The people of God proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ will continue, unstoppable, until Christ returns... and that will only be the beginning. In heaven all other glories will be silenced and Jesus Christ will be exalted.

Persecution cannot silence it. Not in Northern Nigeria, not in Iran, not in China, not in Northern Korea, or anywhere else violence and intimidation is brought against the followers of Jesus Christ. God’s Word proclaims and history confirms that the worship of God will continue forever.

Even apathy will not stop the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of God. One can see this throughout church history. When the churches begin to drift away from God and His Word, God calls out to those who “have ears to hear” and uses them to carry the name of Christ to its desired goal. We see this in Martin Luther and the Reformation, German Pietism, the Moravians, the Mennonite brethren, and the Methodists. Even Baptists came about as a group of believers who clung to God’s Word when the church-at-large had turned away from it. God will continue to raise up a people who will give Him praise above all others.

God is sovereign. He reigns over all things. He stands completely independent of all others. Nothing will stop His will from taking place. At times we use the word sovereign to describe a nation or a person, but in reality none are truly sovereign. A nation cannot insure that its desires will be fulfilled. A person cannot guarantee that their will will be accomplished. Only God is solely independent and can be hindered by no one. Only God is sovereign.

“Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Psalm 115:3). ***“Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps”*** (Psalm 135:6). He ***“works all things after the counsel of His will”*** (Ephesians 1:11). ***“From Him and through Him and to Him are all things”*** (Romans 11:36). ***“For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and***

we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Corinthians 8:6).

This sovereignty of God is also at work in every area of our lives. He ordered the details of Jesus’ triumphal entry centuries before it ever happened. He is moving our world towards its conclusion and Christ’s return. He works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

God has the right to tell us how to live, how to spend our money, how to treat our spouses, how to think about our career, what university we will attend, what event we will go to, or how we will relate to our friends. Our personal sovereignty fights desperately against the biblical teaching that God is over all things and holds us accountable. For most it is an issue of trust and belief. Do we believe that God loves us and really knows what is best for us?

This doctrine of God’s sovereignty is one of the most despised by the mind of fallen man. We abhor the idea that One could exist to whom we must be ultimately accountable. He knows all things. He is all-powerful. He is everlasting to everlasting. He is holy. He is just. This is a huge problem for fallen man. What should a holy God do with people like us? Our sin condemns us, but the beauty of the Gospel is that God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8).

The sovereignty of God is a comfort for those who belong to Him and is a source of fear for those who oppose Him.

I close with this story. When I was a young adult I was involved in an accident in which my skull was fractured. My life was in danger, I was in intensive care, there was an extended stay in the hospital and eventually rehabilitation. It was one of the most difficult seasons of my life. But. . . I can now say with all honesty, if I had the power to go back and change the events of my life, I would leave this season of struggle in place. It was a difficult time, but the blessings that came from it were priceless. Greater depth emerged in our family relationships than ever before. We experienced the faithfulness of God on a daily basis. We saw the provision of God for our every need. The love and the passionate prayers that we received from our Christian brothers and sisters was so uplifting. The brokenness resulted in undeserved blessing. It was such a precious experience for me and my family.

I write these words to testify to the faithfulness and sovereignty of God. There will be days when life is difficult and we have no hope, but know that we belong to a sovereign God who does not sleep and does not slumber. He is on His throne and is working all things for the good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Whether it be a marriage that seems beyond repair, a child that seems hopelessly adrift from God, a financial situation that has left you in despair, or an illness that threatens even life itself, be encouraged that a sovereign God sits on His throne. You are not forgotten. In the midst of suffering, loss and trials, trust in Him to bring about blessing.

He is our Sovereign God. His praises will continue for eternity and His children will experience His faithfulness forever. Today submit yourself to our Sovereign God and walk securely in His eternal embrace.