

THE KING IS COMING

by Ray C. Stedman

We return now to where we left off in our series of studies in Mark. As Chapter 10 ended, our Lord and his disciples were making their way to Jerusalem, toward those climactic events of his last week there which ultimately would issue in his death and resurrection. And now we find the Lord and his disciples approaching Jerusalem.

There is a beautiful song which has been written in these last few years -- one of many marvelous compositions which have come out of the great spiritual movement of our day: *The King Is Coming*. Perhaps you have heard it. I have seen entire audiences greatly moved as that song was sung. It would be very fitting music for our study today, because this is the story of Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem, when the whole city became aware that the King was coming:

And when they drew near to Jerusalem to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat; untie it and bring it. If any one says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" And they went away, and found a colt tied at the door out in the open street; and they untied it. And those who stood there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they told them what Jesus had said; and they let them go. {Mark 11:1-6 RSV}

It is very apparent from this brief account that Jesus had made certain prearrangements for this day. He knew that he was coming into the city and that he was to fulfill prophecies which had been made hundreds of years earlier. So he had made arrangements in advance for fulfillment of the prophecy concerning this colt. Thus we do not need to see this as some miraculous supply of his need. The colt was tied where it was because he had arranged for it to be there. When the word was given that the Lord had need of it, this was all the owners required, because the Lord Jesus had made such arrangements earlier.

If you recall, in one of our previous studies in Mark (Catalog No. 3318) we saw that he had made a quick trip to Jerusalem about three months earlier, in what would be our month of January. It is very likely that he made these arrangements at that time. For Jesus knew the day and the hour he was coming into Jerusalem, and he knew what would be required of that moment. As we saw in our concurrent series of studies with Pastor David Roper in the book of Zechariah, in Chapter 9 (Catalog No. 3425), Zechariah had clearly described what this would be like. The prophet had cried out,

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass. {Zech 9:9 RSV}**

Jesus knew that prophecy, knew that it would need to be fulfilled. So he had made arrangements, I think, that on this particular day, he would be coming into the city on a colt. He knew exactly what day this would be, for the book of Daniel tells us that, almost five hundred years earlier, an angel had appeared to the prophet Daniel and had told him that a certain amount of time had been marked out by God, and would be given over to the fulfillment of certain climactic and dramatic events which concerned the people of Israel.

And the time when this was to begin was clearly given. It would be when the Persian king, Artaxerxes, issued an edict for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. You will find that edict recorded for us in the pages of Scripture, in Chapter 2 of the book of Nehemiah. And when this heathen king issued the edict, he

unknowingly set in motion God's clock for the Jewish nation.

Daniel was told that four hundred ninety years must run their course before all of God's events would be fulfilled, and the passage of four hundred eighty-three of those years would be marked off by the arrival in Jerusalem of Messiah the Prince.

Many years ago there was a brilliant lawyer who served for a long time as the director of England's famed Scotland Yard. His name was Sir Robert Anderson. He was also an avid and devout Bible student. Sir Robert Anderson, with his precise mind and his training in logic, analyzed the book of Daniel and determined the exact date when that decree of Artaxerxes was issued: March 28, 445 B. C. Counting from that date, and making the necessary corrections for calendar errors, he determined that on April 6, A. D. 32, Jesus rode into Jerusalem -- exactly four hundred eighty-three years later.

Now, if a man in the Nineteenth Century could take these Scriptures and figure out the very date on which this event took place, surely the Son of God, who also had the book of Daniel, and knew it very well, and was taught and illuminated by the Holy Spirit as he read its pages, would know the day that he was to come into Jerusalem.

So he made the arrangements to enter the city, and came riding down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, riding on a donkey, on a colt on which no one had ever sat, in fulfillment of the predictions of Zechariah and Daniel.

I find it interesting that all three of the Synoptic Gospels tell us that this was an animal on which no one had ever sat -- a young donkey. When I was a boy in Montana, some of us high school boys would try to break horses for amusement. Some of the full-grown ones were a little too much for us to handle, so we concentrated on the yearling colts on which no one had ever sat. I can give you firsthand testimony that these animals do not welcome that experience! And even at a year's age, they are quite capable of dumping you along the wayside. Here is an animal that no one had ever sat on -- but Jesus sat on him, and he was quiet, responsive, and obedient, and carried him through the streets of the city.

"Well," you say, "if Jesus arranged all this, and worked it all out, doesn't that mean that this is really not a fulfillment of prophecy at all?" Well, I think it is true that he arranged some of it; but he did not arrange all of it. There were things he could not have arranged: the response of the crowd as he came into the city, the attitude of the rulers -- these were far beyond his control. Yet when Jesus came riding down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the crowd welcomed him and greeted him just as the prophets of old had said they would do, Verses 7-10:

And they brought the colt to Jesus, and threw their garments on it; and he sat upon it. And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!" {Mark 11:7-10 RSV}

From other accounts we know they were not so much citizens of Jerusalem as people from Galilee, who were in Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Many were children. And yet, as they saw Jesus coming, they felt deeply moved to cry out the very words that fulfilled Psalm 118. You cannot read this account without seeing that these words must have been much in the Lord's own mind as he went through this experience -- and, unaccountably, also in the minds and hearts of these people. In this psalm David cries,

**The stone which the builders rejected
has become the chief corner stone. {Psa 118:22 RSV}**

**This is the day which the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it. {Psa 118:24 RSV}**

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! {Psa 118:26a RSV}

Those were the very words that these people cried out, as Jesus rode through the streets.

Luke adds something very interesting in his account of this event. In the nineteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel we read, Verses 41-44:

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! [Notice his phraseology: "even today," i.e., "even this day."] But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you 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 19:41-44 RSV}

Amazing words, fulfilled to the letter forty years later when the Roman general, Titus, brought his armies and began a prolonged siege of Jerusalem, and eventually overcame it. And against the general's command the temple was burned, and the gold of the temple's treasury ran into the cracks of the stones. In their efforts to get at the gold, the soldiers pried apart the stones, and literally left not one stone standing upon another. As he rode down the mountain, Jesus knew all that was coming, and he wept because, as Luke records, he says, "you did not know the time of your visitation."

That is one of the most tragic sentences in the Bible. God had sent out invitations to this great event five hundred years before, had told when it would happen, had given an exact time schedule, had told how to recognize the King. But when he came, nobody in the city knew who he was, except a passel of Galilean peasants and their children, who were there celebrating the Passover. What an ironic twist! Yet that is often what happens with us. We do not know the time when God is suddenly in our midst. In Verse 11 we read the purpose of our Lord's visit:

And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. {Mark 11:11 RSV}

That does not sound very significant, yet it tells us what he came to do. This was an official visit of the King of Israel, an inspection tour of the heart of the nation. He went into the temple, where the very heartbeat of the nation was throbbing, represented in the worship that was lifted up to God. And he looked at everything. We know what he saw: commercialism, moneychangers, exploitation, corruption, and injustice. He saw dirt, filth, and squalor, pride, hypocrisy, and haughtiness. He saw that religious ceremonies were being carried on without any meaning whatsoever. But he did not say a word. He just looked around at everything. Nobody noticed him, because he had been there many times before. But they did not know this was an official tour of inspection by the King.

God comes into our lives that way, doesn't he?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if God looked at us only when we came to church on Sunday morning, if he would read our hearts only when we were sitting with the Word of God open before us, and thinking all the nice things we should? Would that not be nice? But he does not; he catches us in the bedroom and in the kitchen and at the office -- and in our car! He comes in and looks around at everything, and does not say a word.

In Verses 21 and following we get the results of this inspection. Jesus did not say a word when he looked around, but the next day he took, first, a symbolic action:

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it. {Mark 11:12-14 RSV}

As we will read in just a few moments, the disciples were surprised the next day when they saw that the tree was withered clear to its roots. Many have been amazed at this miracle. It seems so unlike Jesus. It is the only

miracle in the entire record of Jesus' ministry which is a pronouncement of judgment and condemnation and destruction upon anything. It seems so strange that it would occur to a tree that did not have figs, when it was not the season for figs. This has bothered many people. Why did Jesus curse this tree that did not have figs, when it should not have had figs?

I want to tell you that I puzzled over this problem for years, until I finally decided to conduct some research. When I came to California, I planted a fig tree -- just to see what it would do, and to learn from it. I learned the answer to this riddle from the fig tree in my yard. The first spring I watched with interest as the barren limbs of that tree began to swell, the buds began to fill out, and the leaves began to appear. And to my astonishment -- I did not know this about a fig tree -- little tiny figs appeared right along with the leaves. I thought, "Well, that's strange: the fruit comes right along with the leaf. Fig trees must be very unusual that way." So I watched these little figs grow and turn from green to yellow, and begin to look as if they were ripe. One day I sampled one. To my amazement, instead of being full of juice and pulp as a normal fig would be, it was dry and withered inside, with no juice at all. I opened another, and another, and found the same thing. I thought, "Oh, my fig tree is a lemon!" But then, to my amazement, I saw that the tree began to bear other figs, and these began to swell and grow bigger. And when I opened one, I saw that it was a normal fig, rich and juicy and filled with pulp. And the tree has borne a great crop of figs ever since. So I learned something: a fig tree has two kinds of figs -- one that I call "pre-figs," which look like figs but are not figs, but which always appear first. I learned that if a tree does not have those pre-figs, it will not have real figs later on.

This is the explanation for what Jesus found. It was not the season for real figs. But when Jesus looked at this tree, he found no pre-figs, and so he knew that this tree would never have figs, but produced nothing but leaves. The life of the tree had been spent producing its luxuriant foliage, so that it looked like a healthy tree, but was not. And so he cursed it, and the next day it was withered to its very roots. That tree was a symbol of the nation Israel, as we will see, because what follows here is a dramatic acting out of the symbol of that cursed fig tree. Verses 15-17:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." {Mark 11:15-17 RSV}

Jesus took two very significant actions here which are tantamount to the cursing of this nation, just as he cursed the fig tree when he found it with nothing but leaves:

The first is that he cleansed it from all the false manifestations which had crept in. He cleaned out the commercialism of this temple. This was the second time he had done this. According to John's Gospel, three years before, at the very beginning of his ministry, he had entered this temple and had swept out the moneychangers in very similar fashion. Now he does it again, for the second time, and refuses to allow anyone to commercialize these sacrificial offerings. They were selling animals as a "service" to the people. And because they would accept only the official temple currency, money-changers set up shop (another "service") where people could exchange normal currency into temple currency. The money-changers and traders were making an excessive profit at this business, and Jesus swept the whole mess out.

But then he did something even more significant. Mark says, "He would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple."

If you refer to the books of Leviticus and Numbers, you see that God had instituted a certain set of rituals for that temple which necessitated that the priests would carry many things through it. They had to bring the animals into the temple, bind them upon the altar, and slay them. They had to catch the blood of these animals and carry it in basins into the holy place to sprinkle it on the altar of incense. They had to take the bodies of the sacrifices, after they were burned, and carry them back out again. So there was a continual procession of priests through that temple all day long, carrying out the system of rituals which God himself had given this nation.

But on this day, when Jesus came into the temple, he stopped it dead in its tracks. "He would not permit any one to carry anything through the temple," which means that, as the authorized King of this nation, he rejected its worship and refused to acknowledge it as of any value any longer. Though the Jews later restored this traffic, and kept it up for forty years more until the temple was destroyed, never again did those sacrifices have any meaning before God.

This represented the cursing of the heart of this nation, because it had nothing but leaves. It appeared to have life, but in reality did not. It appeared to offer hope to men and women of the nations of earth. From all over the earth people were coming to the temple at Jerusalem, hoping to find an answer to the emptiness and the burden of their heart, but finding no help there at all. So Jesus cursed the nation.

The immediate result was the withering of the life of the nation. It is manifest in these words: "And the chief priests and scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him." Now, they had never done that before. Every earlier account of the opposition to Jesus of the chief priests and scribes cited their getting together to discuss what they ought to do with him. Now the matter is settled. Now they intend to destroy him, and need only to discuss how to go about it, Verses 18-19:

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city. {Mark 11:18-19 RSV}

That was the point of no return for this nation. It was undoubtedly this act of Jesus -- stopping the worship in the temple -- which resulted in his death within the week. The scribes and the Pharisees would no longer put up with anything Jesus did or said from that moment on. This sealed his death; but it also sealed their destiny.

They thought they were getting rid of him. But it was he, as the King in all his majesty, who had pronounced sentence upon them and had sealed their doom.

The next day, coming back into the city, Jesus begins to explain some of these strange things. And here all that has happened in these tremendous events is borne home to our own hearts. We read, in Verses 20-22:

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! the fig tree which you cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God." {Mark 11:20-22 RSV}

Does that answer not strike you as strange? Many have read this passage and, neglecting to read it in its context, have taken this to be a kind of formula Jesus is giving us which would enable us to work miracles. But if you read this in connection with all the events of this passage, where it belongs, you will see it is not that. He is not telling us the secret of how to curse fig trees; he is telling us the secret of how to live so as not to be cursed. This nation was cursed because it had lost faith in God. It had substituted instead an empty procedure, a meaningless ritual, a performance only, which had an outwardly religious glaze to it, but inwardly was unreal and hypocritical. They had lost faith in God, and so the life of God which was in them was dried up and withered.

This is what Jesus is telling us: "Have faith in God," means that this is the way to live! This is the way to have life full and rich and meaningful -- to trust that the living God knows what he is doing, to believe what he says, to obey what he commands, and to open our life to him so that he may enrich us, and flow through us, and make us a fruitful person, or a fruitful nation, as the case may be. "Have faith in God." This is the answer. A nation or an individual which begins to dry up this source of life, whose faith becomes full and dead, is in danger ultimately of losing the capacity to have life within him. That is what this nation did. Then Jesus went on to say something even more puzzling:

"Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him." {Mark 11:23 RSV}

Once again, we extract that out of context and read it as a magic formula for doing amazing things. Imagine going around and commanding mountains to lift themselves up and cast themselves into the sea! We say, "The secret is, you've got to believe that the thing is going to happen." That is like telling someone not to think of pink elephants. If you tell somebody, "You can have all the riches of the world given to you if, when you ask for them, you will not think of pink elephants," do you know what will happen? They will never get the riches, because under those circumstances it is impossible to stop thinking of pink elephants!

But Jesus is not giving us a formula here for throwing mountains into the sea. He is telling us that to have faith in God at times is difficult to do. He knows that. There are mountains which oppose our faith and make it difficult for us. There are obstacles to faith. This nation had experienced those obstacles, and they were formidable, powerful obstacles. One was their slavery under the Romans. Another was the apparent silence of God. All the many circumstances which aroused doubt and fear in their lives were like a mountain which opposed the great fact that they were to have faith in God. Jesus says, "I tell you, if you ask in faith, that mountain will be removed." And then he goes on to tell us how:

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and you will. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." {Mark 11:24-25 RSV}

Now, do not remove that from its context! What Jesus is saying is, "The great hindrance to having faith in God is pride, the pride which refuses to forgive. That is like a mountain which fills up your whole life. All you can see is that big mountain looming before you, and that is blocking the life of God in your life. You have the power to have that removed if, when you stand and pray, you will forgive those who have offended you." Because the only thing that stops us from forgiving one another is pride. We feel justified in wanting others to forgive us, but also in feeling that we have to exact a price for the hurt they have caused us. So, in many ways -- subtle, or direct and open -- we insist that we will not forgive, that they have to pay for what they have done to us. We are going to be avenged! We are going to have our revenge for what has happened. Somehow, we are going to make them crawl, make them beg or plead for forgiveness. "And that," Jesus says, "is a great mountain which needs to be removed, for it is blocking the flow of the life of God to your faith." So when you stand and pray, life will flow from God when you are able to recognize that you, too, need forgiveness. God has forgiven you. Like the very person you are holding a grudge against, you need forgiveness also. God has offered it freely to you; give it just as freely to them.

You know, after thirty years of ministry, I can recite evidence by the yard that this is true. The one thing above all else which seems to block the flow of the life of God to an individual, to a church, or to a nation, is this unwillingness to forgive, this holding of grudges, this desire to put somebody down in order to feel good yourself, this unwillingness to set these things aside and let God heal all the hurts of life.

That is why Jesus puts his finger on this one thing. Is this not amazing? The nation Israel lost its life because it would not forgive the Gentiles, the Romans, who had offended and grieved it. Instead, it gathered its robes of self-righteousness about it and looked with pride up to God and said, "I thank God I am not like these other people." God says that is what ends the life of a nation. That is what ends the life of a church. And that is what ends the spiritual life of an individual, cuts him off.

May God help us, then, to forgive one another. This is no option, nor is it a luxury; it is a necessity of life.

As we go now to the Lord's table and partake of these elements, may they speak to us abundantly of the ground of our own forgiveness:

- Another has paid the price,
- Another has assumed our debt,
- Another has borne the hurt,

so that we can be free. We can have all his love, and all his life -- freely, without doing anything on our part to merit it. How much more then should we extend that same mercy and love to all who have offended us, and

forgive them, so that the life of God may flourish in our midst, and we may grow strong together in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, thank you for these searching words from Jesus' lips. How vividly do you demonstrate, Father, throughout the course of history, the truth of these principles. How vividly you have demonstrated them in our own lives in many ways. How many times we have refused the forgiving word, the restoring act, and have delivered ourselves to the torturers, just as you have said, Lord Jesus, to be tormented by fears and anxieties and worries and pressures and doubts We have had to remain there, Lord, until we were ready to forgive. Thank you for the forgiveness which is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord. As we celebrate this feast together, which speaks so eloquently of it, may our hearts also extend to all who have injured us a forgiving word a forgiving touch. May we love them, Lord, as you have loved us -- in our evil, our self-righteousness. our pride and haughtiness and arrogance -- and yet have forgiven us Thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The King is Coming
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Ruler who Serves
Scripture: Mark 11:1-25
Message No: 8
Catalog No: 3322
Date: June 1, 1975

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