

Opportunity Of A Lifetime

by Steve Zeisler

Last weekend I was at a conference at the church where my wife Leslie and I were married just over 19 years ago, and memories flooded back to me. I found myself recalling that very special moment when I stood at the front of the sanctuary, and my bride and her father entered the back door and began walking up the aisle to beautiful music. The approach of the woman that God had given me to be my wife, and the beginning of a relationship that has been more than I could have ever expected, is a great memory.

We're going to consider this morning the approach of a glorious occasion -- the time when Jesus, declaring himself to be Sovereign of his nation, would approach its capital. We'll talk about the reception by the people of God to Jesus' approach as King. It was as magnificent an occasion as any wedding day, and yet it was not understood to be so by those who were there. I think we will benefit significantly from seeing the journey the Lord took and being reminded of the approach of God to us, the importance of the offer he made. I hope we'll feel the weight of accountability to respond. The King is coming, and it's important for us to be receptive to his approach, to understand the offer that he's making.

Going to Jerusalem

Matthew's account of the journey begins in chapter 20, verse 17:

And as Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up."

Luke says at this point in his account that the disciples do not understand any of this. Its meaning is hidden from them, and they do not know what he is talking about. They are confused by the combination of his clear statement, "We are going up to Jerusalem," albeit in some special sense, combined with his awful prediction of crucifixion and death. They don't understand how that could possibly be so.

In Matthew 20:18, Jesus announces his goal: delivery to the chief priests and scribes. We come to the end of this section in 21:15 when he arrives at his goal, standing in the temple before the spiritual leadership of the nation. Before we look at their inadequate response to the coming of the Lord's Anointed, let's consider what takes place on the journey that follows the announcement in verse 18, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem."

It's very clear that Jesus means his disciples to understand that this trip to Jerusalem will be special. He has traveled to Jerusalem many times before, of course. During his youth he would have gone often with his family to Jerusalem to worship. Even during the three years of his public ministry, he made trips to Jerusalem for various occasions including earlier Passover feasts. But this time he says, "We are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes." He uses the messianic title son of Man; he is proclaiming himself to be the Messiah. As the story unfolds we'll see that he had already planned to go riding on the foal of a donkey. Zechariah had predicted that the King would come to Jerusalem in that manner. He is intending to enter as King, not just as a worshiper among other Jews.

Requesting dominion

So let's begin the journey. From somewhere to the east of Jericho, we'll travel on through Jericho and then up the hill to Jerusalem. There are two groups of the King's subjects that are going to make requests of him on his journey. The first is two of the disciples, the sons of Zebedee, and the second two blind men outside of

Jericho. They are going to make an appeal to their Sovereign for benefit, a royal boon. In Matthew 20: 20 we have the first of these requests:

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left." But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." He said to them, "My cup you shall drink) but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father."

If you want the position of royalty, the choice you make is to drink the cup that Jesus drank

And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, " You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Now, the request is made by the mother of these two brothers, but Jesus doesn't answer her; he turns to them directly. In the other gospels it is clear that it was their idea to request of Jesus that they get prime seats in the kingdom, and they get their mother to make the request for them. Now that's a bad idea right there- grown men should not be having their mother going off trying to fix life for them! Interestingly enough, that sets off a little fire storm among the other disciples. They are indignant, but mainly because they didn't think of it first.

Our Lord doesn't participate in the argument. He actually dignifies the request. Earlier, in Matthew 19:28, Jesus had already said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." He'd already promised them that they would be seated on regal thrones of their own, that they would have positions of authority, that they were destined for honor and dignity. So he doesn't view their request as inappropriate. But he does have a great deal to say about how the answer will come about.

Destined to rule

It's proper for people like us to hope for honor and glory. Psalm 8 says that's what we were made for. We are destined by the Lord for greatness in his name. The question is, how do you come by it? The King's answer is interesting. He says, first of all, "It is not mine to give. I may not parcel out these thrones in whatever order they are to be given. My Father, whom I am trusting for my own glorification, is preparing those who will sit in these places for their positions." The disciples expected the rule of Messiah to begin in Jerusalem and then to expand, destroying the power of Rome and assuming command of the earth. The king would then parcel out the world to those he favored. Caesar had done so with his empire- giving political authority to his friends. What Jesus says, on the other hand, is that dominion comes about by the individual's being prepared for it on the inside. It comes about as God works in a life. We are not given a throne as a gift; we become fitted for authority. We will have been changed sufficiently so that the throne is appropriate for us. The place of authority, the glorification that we receive has been created over time by choices we make, trusting in the Father. It's not a gift, but God's creative activity in our lives, preparing us for whatever throne will be ours.

The Lord goes on to say that the creative activity that makes us fit is God's teaching us to give up our rights. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life." If you want the position of royalty, the choice you make is to drink the cup that Jesus would drink. As King he would be handed a goblet that was mixed by another for him, and in that goblet would be all the difficulty and anguish of the cross, all the hurt and violation that he would go through, giving away his life so that others could gain life. that's the cup that his followers should drink, choosing to serve rather than be served. That's the choice they will make, and in the process they go through to learn that, God will fit them for dominion some day. Jesus wants us to rule with him, but we must undergo the process of crucifying our flesh, serving others, and experiencing the

joy of losing this world's advantages so that we can have that which will last forever.

The cry of blind men

The second request that was made to the King by his subjects as he journeys toward his capital city begins in Matthew 20: 29. Here we find two blind men who make an appeal:

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And the multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Lord, we want our eyes to be opened." And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him.

This request is at the other end of the scale, so to speak. The disciples ask for dominion, authority, and greatness. These men just ask for mercy. They are blind. They live without knowing color, perspective, or the beauty that vision can bring into our experience. In addition to being blind, they are poor. They must beg for enough food to eat to get them through the day. Beyond being blind and poor, they are rejected. They are set off at the margin of things and sternly told to keep quiet. The only hope they have is that they might be shown mercy. Now, it is important to notice that they address Jesus as Son of David twice. The title Son of David is a royal title. They know, by some means, that the King is passing by. So they address him as King, Son of David.

Our Lord acts contrary to the crowd's wishes. He overrides the stern rebuke of the crowd and stops the procession. He goes near those who need his mercy, and moved by compassion, he touches them. And they receive their sight and begin to follow him. It is important to realize (as Zebedee's sons learned) that the King wants to give greatness by teaching service, that his exaltation will bring dominion to us as well. That's a glorious truth. But it's also important for us to realize that the King is compassionate by nature, and without exception. When we need mercy and appeal to him to be treated mercifully, he will treat us with mercy! When we're hurt, broken, frightened, confused, alone, set aside, when there's no hope left, when we lose our jobs, when our families fall apart, when agony of whatever kind is ours, our cry for mercy will always bring the touch of the Lord. He is compassionate by nature and will not turn aside his subjects who appeal to him for his mercy.

Opportunity for faith

It is interesting to note that he asks them a question: "What do you want me to do for you?" He does that in order to give them a chance to express their faith. When all the other passersby stopped and asked the question, "What do you want me to do for you?" the blind men would say, "Give us alms." They begged for a living. But this time, because the King is there, what they ask for is a miracle: "Give us our sight back." They can make such a request only because they have faith in the extraordinary nature of the one before them. So Jesus asks the question in order to give them a chance to express their faith. Another observation we can make about this episode is that the people in the crowd are much blinder than the blind men. Those in the crowd don't understand with whom they're dealing; they are along for the ride. They are much less aware of who the King is and what he is about.

We learn something about the King, don't we? His followers have the right to appeal to him for both dominion and mercy. And they have lessons to learn about how he will respond. And now the King is starting up to Jerusalem for the last time. It is 10 or 12 miles from the city of Jericho up the hill to the city of Jerusalem. The Messiah is coming to his city. Chapter 21, verse 1:

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." Now this took place that what

was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying,

**"Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold your king is coming to you,
Gentle, and mounted on a donkey,
Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."**

**And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey
and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat.**

Prophecy fulfilled

There is a dissonance set up here that's important for us to recognize. First of all Jesus is very deliberately declaring to anybody who will pay attention that he is King and he knows it. He gives directions that this donkey's colt should be brought to him, and he is going to ride in from the Mount of Olives through the eastern gate of the city. Jesus is effectively sounding a trumpet and announcing he's King, for Zechariah predicted the King would come riding on a donkey's colt. He is deliberately identifying himself with the prophecy.

But what's extraordinary is that the prophecy is what it is. Of all the possible ways in which a king should enter his capital, this one calls attention to his humility, to the delight this King takes in nearness to his subjects. He doesn't come in battle array. He doesn't ride on a prancing steed. He doesn't come in a chariot drawn by dozens of snorting and powerful horses, with an impressive army going ahead of him and following behind him. Pagan rulers in generations past had entered Jerusalem that way. They had overtaken the city and claimed it for themselves; they had dominated the people of God. But when their own King comes, he comes in gentleness, wooing them, inviting a relationship rather than demanding it. He comes persuading them to believe in his love rather than dominating them by his power. It's an awesome thing. Jesus is clearly claiming to be King, but he is also claiming to be the kind of king that Zechariah saw: one who is gentle and loving, available, and near to people like us.

I was reading the accounts of Kuwait's being given back its sovereignty and the eventual return of the emir of Kuwait. One of the accounts noted that there is not running water yet in most parts of country, there are still oil wells burning out of control, and there is no electricity in the capital city. Ordinary people are living under terrible conditions. Before the emir would return to his palace, however, it had to be made epic -- and -- span, the pool refilled with water, etc. But they were having a horrible time because they couldn't find enough light bulbs for all the chandeliers, because every room in the palace has a chandelier, and they were short so many. And the emir, the king of that nation, was not going to return unless he could return to a palace fit for a king, as a potentate whose domination was clear to everyone, even if the people didn't have electricity and water yet. Yet Jesus entered Jerusalem in nearness to his people, not in distance from them. Matthew 21:8:

**And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting
branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going before
Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying**

**"Hosanna to the Son of David;
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest!"**

**And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying "Who is this?" And
the multitudes were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."**

"Who is this ?"

The people are stirred by what is taking place. They know of the prophecy, and they understand what is happening. They grow excited and cast their garments and the branches down before him and sing the hosannas. The King is coming! Yet at the same time, they are asking, "Who is this? What does this mean?" One of the answers is that he is the prophet from Galilee. But that answer is not sufficient, and the people are

abuzz with hope and confusion, praise and wonder. What will take place now? The answer will not be made plain until Jesus finishes the journey, until he enters the temple. that's where he said he was to go at the beginning of this journey. The people who know best who he is are the scribes who know Zechariah backward and forward, the chief priests who are leaders of worship. These are the ones who will settle the hearts of the people and speak for them, who will answer the question, "Who is this?" They are the ones to whom the appeal is made.

Think carefully about this. The Lord begins this journey by calling himself the Son of Man, a title for Messiah. The blind men call him Son of David, a royal title. Jesus calls himself King by quoting Zechariah. The people say he is a prophet, which he certainly is, from Galilee. He is ultimately going to enter the temple where only the priests can serve, and if we understand it fully, he will finally enter the temple as the sacrifice himself. This extraordinary figure's arrival is a momentous event in history. An offer is being made to the nation, a demand for response. A critical moment is before everyone. And the people are buzzing, wondering who it is, how it will turn out, what's the import of it all, what decisions will be made. So we end the journey with the paragraph beginning with Matthew 21:12:

The Lord honors our desire for greatness, but teaches us where true greatness comes from.

And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robbers' den." And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple and saying Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant, and said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast prepared praise for Thyself'?"

And then we hear the ominous word of verse 17 as the journey has ended and the offer has been made:

And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there.

The King has come all the way to the heart of the city to the temple on Mount Zion, and he is rebuffed by those who ought to have received him. And finally, at the end of the journey, he leaves, and the critical moment has passed. Mark records that the chief priests and the scribes not only are indignant, but they begin at this moment looking for a way to kill him, for they fear him, because the whole crowd is amazed at his teaching. They are afraid of everything he represents: He comes into the temple and insists that it be a house of prayer as it ought to be, rather than a place of commerce, a place where the ordinary people are taken advantage of financially, a place where religion has become a business from which the chief priests and scribes benefit. He comes as the true King and insists on real relationships with God. He insists that the Lord be at the heart of worship and that the human instruments become much less important. And the chief priests and scribes recognize all of this as a threat to them. They prefer the status quo where God is at a distance, where the responsibility is theirs to control rather than theirs to obey. And they recognize that if the people understand what is taking place and receive this man's royalty, their own position, authority, and advantages in this life will be lost to them.

It is clear again that those who make the most of the opportunity are the blind, the lame, and the children. They embrace the King. They rejoice and sing hosanna. They cry out, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" But those in leadership, those who control the destiny of the nation, hate and reject him and begin to plot to kill him.

"He left them"

It says then in the ominous note in verse 17 that Jesus leaves. He has come to the city and it has not received him, so he leaves and goes to Bethany. And as the story unfolds they will kill him. They will kill him, turn him over to the Gentiles for execution, and assume they have rid themselves of him, only to find that he was indeed the King, and he will begin in his reign in his resurrection.

Let me review this in conclusion. When Jesus first began this journey up to Jerusalem to the temple, two groups of his followers made an appeal to him. One group asked for dominion, and Jesus honored their request. He said, "Yes indeed, you shall rule with me, you shall become honorable and glorious. That's an entirely appropriate request, but let me remind you that the way you achieve that is by giving up your life. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. You must drink from the same cup that I drink from. And my Father who will care for me is the same Father who will care for you, and you will become everything that you long to be in the process." It's a wonderful lesson. The Lord honors our desire for greatness, but teaches us where true greatness comes from. The second group who made an appeal to him were the most desperate of all, the begging, blind outsiders of Jericho. Their only appeal was that he show them mercy, and he was moved by compassion he met their need. That's always an appropriate request to make of the King as well: "Treat me with mercy, Lord. Touch me with your compassion." But when he came to those who had stewardship of the capital city he was rejected and eventually killed.

I would like to end by speaking to those among us who may not know Christ yet, or even to those who are Christians who may be in rebellion against the Lordship of Christ. The King comes with an offer. He comes our direction and reaches out to us. He makes plain that he is the Sovereign, but he rules in gentleness and love; he wants the best for us. He insists on purity by cleansing the temple. He receives praise from the needy. In all these things he is saying, "Here is where life is." The offer is made sincerely, but eventually he leaves. Eventually those who are determined to rebel are allowed to seal themselves in their rebellion.

I think it is very important for us to realize that when we are approached by the Lord God, our decisions are serious. We can't treat him as if he were a telephone call that we can put on hold forever.

I was speaking yesterday to a graduate student at the annual retreat of the Chinese Christian Fellowship at Stanford. A number of non-- Christians had come. They tend to be brilliant; the intellectual cream of the crop from countries abroad. This young man I was talking to said that he had done a lot of reading about Christianity; he'd been fascinated by it for a long time. But he kept saying, "What can you do to persuade me further? I am not ready to believe." As winsome as he was, underneath there was an element of pride. He was saying in effect, "I'm really the superior in this discussion, and God needs to do more to persuade me. Some day I may give him a break and join the cause. But I am not sufficiently impressed yet." We talked for a long time. I was trying to marshal arguments and use apologetics as brilliantly as I could to persuade him. But I came away thinking afterward that it's probably dangerous to attempt such persuasion for someone like him, because he may let himself believe that the process can go on indefinitely. He doesn't ever have to decide that enough has been done because it's up to him; he's in charge of this business of knowing God or not. However, unending postponement turns out to be rejection.

Now again, if you are not a Christian, I urge you to take seriously the call. He makes this offer from his heart; he longs to give life to you. It may well be that this is the day when you are to give your life to Christ. Perhaps this is the time when he has entered as close as he'll come. He wants to bathe you in his mercy. He wants to set you on the road to glory and honor. He wants you to come to know him.

One becomes a Christian by prayer. It is simply the statement to God that you believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be and that you embrace the benefits of his death and resurrection. In that simple statement you give your life over to him. I invite you to make that simple statement to him now, and become a follower of the Sovereign rather than an onlooker or an enemy.

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Steve Zeisler
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