

Here Comes the King

The Passion of Christ – Part I

John 12:12-21

Introduction

The moment has finally arrived. The air is thick with excitement. Jesus is about to ride into Jerusalem and the crowds are going to shout triumphant “hosannas”. But, unknown to the casual observer, behind the scenes there were a great number of important things interwoven into this incredible day.

A King’s Welcome . . . From the Crowd

Let us pick up our story at John, chapter 12, verses 12 to 13a.

On the next day the great multitude who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees, and went out to meet Him . . .

Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived in Israel in early times, estimates that, on any given Passover in the first century, the population would swell to approximately three million people. This is no handful, who would come out to greet their King, and later, cry out for his crucifixion.

Now, you need to understand the significance of what this crowd does.

The people’s cry

1. First, they wave palm branches. This is an activity reserved for royalty.

The palm tree had long become a sacred symbol in Israel. “Tamar,” was a popular personal name meaning, “date palm”. The palm branches were part of the Festival of Booths. The Maccabean coins had been decorated with the palm and vine. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem, he had medals created that showed a slave sitting under a palm tree – a symbol of Israel’s capture.

It is interesting, in the book of Revelation, chapter 7, verses 9 through 10, that the believers will do this –

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

What are they doing in these verses? Look at John, chapter 12, verse 13, again.

[they] took the branches of the palm trees, and went out to meet Him, and began to cry out, “Hosanna! . . .”

This is Hebrew for, “save us now”.

The Jews expected Jesus to come to Jerusalem to, ultimately, overthrow Rome and restore the nation to sovereign rule.

2. The second thing this crowd is doing is singing.

Look at the last part of verse 13.

. . . Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.

This happens to be a portion of the Hallel from verse 26a of Psalm, chapter 118. Every Jewish boy had memorized this early on.

However, they have added something. David only wrote the words, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord . . .”, but this crowd has added, “. . . even the King of Israel.”

What is happening? Israel is welcoming Jesus to the holy city and, virtually, crowning Him King.

The prophecy’s culmination

Did you notice what Jesus is riding on? Look at verse 14.

And Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it . . .

The other gospel writers fill us in on the fact that this was an unbroken colt – a young donkey that had never been ridden before.

This fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah, approximately five hundred years earlier, in chapter 9, verse 9. He wrote, and it is quoted in John, chapter 12, verse 15,

Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.

Not only does this fulfill prophecy, but it is a miracle of Christ's authority as Creator over creation. Imagine riding an unbroken colt!

We took our kids to a rodeo, and the cowboys tried to do that sort of thing. They hung on for about seven seconds!

Remember, this colt would have not only been unbroken, but skittish, and afraid. Yet, here it is, carrying Jesus, with thousands of people milling about, throwing garments before its path, waving palm branches and shouting. What a miracle!

By the way, the donkey was the royal symbol of peace in this part of the world. So Jesus is signifying that He is, in fact, royalty. He is a Prince, the Son of God, but He is the Prince of Peace.

Good Thursday?!

Now, notice that John has made specific mention of the days in this chapter. Chapter 12, verse 1, begins with,

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany . . .

And, verse 12, of chapter 12, says,

On the next day the great multitude who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem

Now, just when did this happen? When did Jesus arrive in Jerusalem and when did the crucifixion to come take place?

For reasons I will show in a moment, I want to deal with the problem of chronology today. I am sure you are excited!

I, myself, have to admit to you that chronology has never been an interest of mine. Yet, as I studied for this sermon, I was already troubled with a very simple question. It was a question raised from Matthew's account of this passion week, as it related to Jesus' death and entombment. Look at Matthew, chapter 12, verse 40.

for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

The question is this, "How could Jesus have been crucified on Friday and then, rise again just before dawn on Sunday?"

Now, I know that Jews would claim that a portion of a day or night would, in their writings, be considered a whole day and a whole night. I have no problem with that.

The problem lies in Matthew's declaration that Jesus would be in the tomb not only three days, but three nights! If Christ were crucified on Friday afternoon, then that leaves us with Friday night and Saturday night, and not even the slightest sliver of a third night anywhere, no matter how you slice it!

What I uncovered, in my study, is a series of debates and arguments. There are good scholarly men arguing with one another. I found, at least, four different chronologies listed.

One scholar I respect, by the name of Frederick Godet, actually moved the resurrection ahead one day to Monday, in order for there to be at least three days and three nights.

Another popular answer, by men I respect, is that we must not take Jesus literally. Many times, days and nights are merely portions of one or the other.

I do agree that this issue is of relatively small importance. What is important is the fact that Jesus died on the cross and He rose again.

So, what is the answer? I am going to provide a chronology that, I believe, is correct for one primary reason. It has to do with one advantage that, I believe, is beautiful enough to spend time explaining chronology to an audience filled with people who may be a lot like me – somewhat uninterested. Stay with me, because I think you will be fascinated by the conclusion I will draw later.

There are three key passages to deal with.

- The first passage, Mark, chapter 15, verses 42 and 43, is the passage upon which the traditional church view takes its stand.

And when evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, . . . and asked for the body of Jesus.

The traditional view rests firmly upon the biblical statement that Jesus was crucified on the day before the Sabbath. And, what day is the Sabbath? Saturday.

Now, here is a point that is often overlooked – it is the simple fact that, during the Passover celebration, there were two Sabbaths.

According to Leviticus, chapter 23, there was to be a “high Sabbath” observed during the week of the Passover celebration. The Jews were to rest on that day, just as they would rest on a normal Saturday Sabbath. Is it possible that this particular year, the Passover Sabbath was on Friday? This would make it possible that Mark was referring to the high Passover Sabbath, not the normal Saturday Sabbath.

The answer is, “Yes,” and two scripture verses prove this point.

- The first scripture is Matthew, chapter 28, verses 1 and 2.

Now after the Sabbath[s], as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.

The plural “sabbaths,” or “Sabbata” in the Greek, has been a puzzle to many commentators and translators who usually change it to the singular, “sabbath,” or “Sabbaton”. However, there is no problem if the high Passover Sabbath and the normal Sabbath, on this particular year, were Friday and Saturday. Therefore, these women were not allowed to anoint the body of Jesus until after the Sabbath period, which was two days in a row.

- The next clue is even more conclusive. Look at John’s gospel, chapter 19, verses 30 through 33.

When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit. The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with

Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.

Did you catch that? The leaders wanted Jesus and the others buried because that evening, they were going to prepare for the Sabbath. And bless John’s heart, he is the only gospel writer who lets us in on an incredible fact – the next day was not the normal Saturday Sabbath – it was the high Sabbath.

So, this is the chronology that, I believe, actually took place. By the way, this is not unique with me. There are several careful exegetes who have been instrumental in convincing me.

Now the question you are all asking is, “What difference does it make?”

So we are celebrating on Friday what we should celebrate on Thursday. Do I want to change good Friday to good Thursday?

No – no more than I want to change the twenty fifth of December. The important point is that we celebrate His crucifixion and resurrection.

I have spent this time so that I can give you the correct context for what happened in John, chapter 12, verses 12 and 13. And what an incredibly beautiful context it is!

First, however, let us look at one more passage – a passage that spelled out the instruction for the original Passover. Perhaps you remember the story surrounding the very first Passover, in the book of Exodus, chapter 12. The death angel was coming. Everyone who wanted to have their firstborn son live had to select a lamb, kill it, and put blood on their doorpost. Wherever there was blood, the death angel would pass over that home – thus the word “Passover”.

Moses told them to choose their Passover lamb on the tenth day of Nisan. They were to keep it until the fourteenth day and then kill it in the evening.

Let me show you. Look at Exodus, chapter 12, verses 3 and 5 through 6.

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, “On the tenth day of this month they are to each one take a lamb for themselves, according to their father’s households, a lamb for each household. . . . Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; . . . And you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole

assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight.”

Over the course of generations, the Jewish leaders instructed the people to carefully follow Moses’ guidelines during that very first Passover. So, up to Jesus’ day, on the tenth of Nisan, which, this year, fell on Sunday, people, who had come to Jerusalem, had their Passover lambs with them.

Josephus informs us that a census was taken of the lambs slain at a first century Passover Feast. The number of lambs was 256,000. If one lamb served a family of no more than ten, then there were nearly three million people who had flocked into Jerusalem for this Passover celebration.

According to this chronology of events, in Nisan, or April:

- Sunday the tenth – Passover lambs are brought to Jerusalem – Jesus arrives;
- Thursday the fourteenth – the lambs are killed – Jesus is crucified;
- Friday the fifteenth – the nation rests in its redemption – the penalty for sin is paid.

What is happening on Thursday, the day before the high Sabbath? Jesus Christ is hanging on a cross! The Lamb of God is paying the penalty for the sin of the whole world. At the same time, the Jews are killing their lambs in memory of their redemption in Egypt. Jesus is the final Passover Lamb – they just did not see the connection.

On Friday the fifteenth, the nation rested on its high Sabbath. It was a rest that commemorated its redemption. And Christ in the tomb, signaled the payment for sin was paid – mankind could forever rest in their Redeemer!

Notice now, however, the Sunday prior to all of this, the Jews are herding thousands of lambs into the city. And who is in the middle of it all? Jesus is! And He is surrounded by Passover lambs that would die in memory of Israel’s past redemption.

“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is riding into Jerusalem. Can you imagine the picture? He, the ultimate sacrifice, the heavenly Lamb, surrounded by thousands of sacrificial lambs.

What a picture. Down to the last detail, God’s plan of redemption is a beautiful story.

Now remember, we have the whole story, but this was not so with the somewhat confused disciples. It

would not be until later that they would put the prophetic and symbolic picture together. Notice John, chapter 12, verses 16 through 18.

These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him. And so the multitude who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb, and raised him from the dead, were bearing Him witness. For this cause also the multitude went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign.

In other words, the news is out – Lazarus remains, as we have previously studied the chief miracle that undeniably reveals Christ’s authentic claim to be God.

A King’s Welcome . . . From the Religious Leaders

Now what about the Jewish leaders?

Turn back to John, chapter 11, verse 53.

So from that day on they planned together to kill Him [Jesus].

Turn over to chapter 12, verse 10.

But the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also.

Notice the last verse of chapter 11 – verse 57.

Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him.

Ha! Here they are, forced to stand on the sidelines while the multitudes shouted praises to their King. Can you imagine the irony?

The leaders’ despair

Notice what they, in total frustration, say, in verse 19.

The Pharisees therefore said to one another, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him.”

The words, “you see” could be translated, “Look at that sight”. “We want to kill Him and the people want to coronate Him.”

I happen to love it when unbelievers, who want to silence the Son of God, are compelled to see God's Son honored.

My wife and I watched the late President Nixon's funeral. You heard the prayers; you watched the proceedings, along with millions of people, on prime television. This is normally the block of time reserved for ridiculing and undermining the honor and values of Christianity.

Then, Billy Graham got up to preach. Do you see it?! While millions of God rejecters watched, while the liberal media was forced to focus in, while ungodly politicians sat, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ; he called everyone "sinners who needed the Savior"!

I was sitting there alternating between "Amen," and "Sick 'em."

I think of Trans World Radio that now uses the headquarters for Hitler's propaganda as a station for broadcasting the gospel.

I think of atheistic Romania, once ruled by a God hater. Now, a few years after his death, seven graduates walked across a simple stage in a seminary in Arad. One was a pastor from Zalow who had been persecuted severely by the communists. He had been poisoned with rat poison; every room in his home had been bugged; and now, he, along with former dentists, an engineer, and a newspaper editor, graduated to go out with the gospel.

So, in verse 19, the Jesus haters are forced to stand by and listen as the nation sings praises to their Messiah. And the leaders can only cry in their soup, ". . . look, the [whole] world is going after Him."

Ladies and gentlemen, mark it down, to oppose Christ is a hopeless task. You cannot stop the sovereign plan of God. God is not wringing his hands over the latest decision to come out of Washington, D.C. God is not nervous about the latest New Age advance. God is not calling an emergency meeting of the Trinity.

There will be people in every generation who will spend their lifetime opposing Christ, rejecting Him, and doing their best to ridicule him. They are found on college campuses, behind news anchor desks, publishing books, and in liberal pulpits. The only thing they will destroy, ultimately, is themselves.

I think of atheist Frenchman Voltaire, who said, "You have seen what one Jew did to create

Christianity, I will show you what one Frenchman will do to destroy it."

And, with his pen in hand, he attacked the citadel of heaven. Then, after his death, his home was purchased by the Geneva Bible Society and Bibles were warehoused there, awaiting delivery.

The Pharisees, at this moment, should have waved the white flag and bowed before their Messiah. At another time, we will take a look at why they did not.

Now, it is no coincidence that John puts the next paragraph where he does. Remember, in verse 19, the Pharisees had said, ". . . look, the world has gone after Him."

A King's Welcome . . . From the Gentile Greeks

Then, in the very next verse, representatives from the Gentile world come for an interview.

Their representative position

Now notice verses 20 through 21.

Now there were certain Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these therefore came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Why come to Philip? Because Philip was a disciple with a Greek name; in fact, the popular namesake of King Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, the Greek conqueror. So, they cornered Philip and asked him to arrange a meeting with Jesus.

Their intense plea

In fact, the verb in verse 21, ". . . [they] began to ask him, . . ." could be rendered, "they kept on asking him."

Why the hesitancy on Philip's part? Why did he have to go and get Andrew's advice in verse 22a, which tells us,

Philip came and told Andrew . . .

- For one thing, he was not too sure a Gentile had a right to the Jewish Messiah.
- For another, with all the people clamoring for Jesus, surely He would not want to see them – He is famous now.

To the eyes of humanity, when you are great and famous, you become hard to reach. You become isolated in your private world, on your private yacht, in your private jet, and at your private parties. “Take a number” – that is how a king would live – hard to reach!

Jesus reverses all of that and becomes available. Why? Because, as John, chapter 3, verse 16, says,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Jesus never turned anyone away who said, “I must see Jesus.”

Besides that, this is a subtle message that the gospel will be for the Jew and the Gentile!

Well, if we could put the camera on fast forward:

- This arrival in Jerusalem, leads to His rejection, but, His next arrival, in Revelation, ends in His coronation;
- this arrival left Him alone, for even His friends deserted Him, but, the final arrival will signal a moment when, according to Philippians, chapter 2, verses 10 and 11, “. . . every knee should bow . . . and . . . every tongue should confess that [He] . . . is Lord”;
- the crowd, in John’s gospel, crown Jesus with thorns, but, in John’s revelation, we will see Him ascend the throne of David in regal splendor.

This should teach us that the events of time, the movements of peoples, the rejection and acceptance of Christ are all directed by the hand of a sovereign God. He planned this incredible day before the worlds were created.

The question is, “Have you taken your place among the redeemed?”

His last arrival in the new Jerusalem is going to come true, just as this arrival did. Where will you stand?

I can only pray that you have already waved the flag of surrender to the King and that you will be among those who, in that Heavenly Kingdom, will one day sing Revelation, chapter 5, verse 12,

. . . Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

John continues to write, in Revelation, chapter 5, verses 13 and 14a,

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever. . . . Amen.”