



THE NOT SO TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 12:12-26

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Most people want to be winners. Many can even identify with Lucy, the Peanuts cartoon character, who said, "Winning isn't everything; winning *big* is!" We don't like to lose, especially when we lose big. We can all identify with Binkl Bogatej, the Yugoslavian ski jumper whose spectacular miscue enlivens the introduction to ABC's Wide World of Sports. He forever personifies the agony of defeat.

I had the privilege of traveling with Ray Stedman to many different places and hearing him teach the Scriptures with consummate ease. On one particular occasion I remember being discouraged, and listening to Ray didn't help. I told him I thought I was inadequate. With a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Indeed you are, my boy, and so am I. It's good that we know it. Some people live their lives never knowing that they don't have what it takes." G.K. Chesterton said, "We are all ordinary people, and it is the extraordinary people who know it."

The problem with many of us, however, is that we are perilously adequate. We go through life believing in ourselves, in our own power and personalities. But our self-confidence becomes a stumbling block. We are so good at what we do, we are no good at all. In terms of eternal significance, unaided humanity is useless.

We will see this truth again today as we examine the apostle John's account of what many have called the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. His account, from chapter 12 of his gospel, is given in very brief terms. John 12:12:

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, and [began] to cry out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." And Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." 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. The Pharisees therefore said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him."

It is commonly felt that this event was a well deserved recognition by our Lord of his Messiahship; that at last he was receiving a proper welcome as a King. But that is not what was happening here. A reading of the four gospels makes it evident that this was not a welcome for Jesus by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Actually, the people who welcomed him were pilgrims who had come to the feast, many of them from other countries. In fact, Matthew reports that the whole city was stirred up when they saw the procession coming down the Mount of Olives. But instead of joining in the "Hosannas," they suspiciously asked, "Who is this?" The crowd making up the procession had to inform them, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth."

Jesus had left Bethany and made his way around the Mount of Olives, beginning his descent into the Kidron Valley, just to the east of Jerusalem. As he approached the city, pilgrims who had come there for the Passover Feast heard of his arrival and poured out of the gates to meet him. John says they took with them palm branches which they waved, shouting all the while (this is the sense of the Greek text), "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel."

This chant is part of a quotation from Psalm 118:25,26: "O Lord, please save us! O Lord, please send prosperity. Blessed is the one [the King] who comes in the name of the Lord...." The context of the psalm makes it clear that the one who came in the Lord's name would be none other than the King himself, the Messiah, and it was he who would save Israel. The quotation concludes with the phrase, "the name of the Lord." What followed, the phrase, "even the King of Israel," was their interpretation of the meaning of the psalm. And they were right. Jesus was indeed their long-awaited King.

But Jesus next did a startling thing. He found a little donkey and mounted it, and rode into the city. Kings in those days rode mules or stallions, but Israel's King came riding on a little flop-eared donkey, his feet dragging in the dust of the streets. What a strange spectacle! On this dignified occasion, Jesus looked anything but dignified.

John says that the disciples didn't understand the significance of this event. That insight came later. But my question is, "What is there to understand?" There must be something more here than meets the eye. And there is. We will discover what it is in Zechariah's prophecy.

According to John, Jesus was fulfilling a prophecy, written more than 500 years earlier (in 480 BC) to the ef-

fect that Israel's Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. Let's look at that prediction, from Zechariah 9. As is the case with many New Testament quotations from the Old Testament, the OT context must be kept in mind in order to understand the full force of the words. Zechariah 9-11 is a lengthy prophecy concerning Israel's immediate future, the coming of her Messiah, and his rejection. The passage begins with a prediction of Alexander the Great's conquest of Syria, Phoenicia, and Israel's coastal plain. Zechariah 9:1-6 traces Alexander's line of march, beginning with the conquest of Damascus and Hamath (both cities in Syria), to Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia. But there is a change in tone in verse 7:

"I will remove the blood from their mouth, their unclean food and sacrifices. Then they also will be a remnant for our God, and be like a clan [or tribal chief] in Judah and Ekron like a Jebusite [the Jebusites were absorbed into Judah after their conquest by David].

Zechariah's intent was clearly to predict that these people, who formerly were hostile to God, would be brought in and saved. So he has moved on to a later date, the coming of Israel's Messiah. Verse 9:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion [the people of Jerusalem]. Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation [able to save], humble and mounted on a donkey, even the foal of a donkey."

So that there would be no confusion, Zechariah made it clear that Messiah's mount would not be a mule, but a donkey, actually the foal of a donkey (mules are foaled by mares; they have a horse for a dam, not a donkey). I believe Zechariah's purpose here was to contrast Alexander's conquest with the conquest of the Messiah. Alexander came conquering astride his war-horse; Messiah came conquering on a donkey. The verses that follow explain the symbol. Verse 10:

**I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim,
and the (war) horse from Jerusalem,
And the bow of war will be cut off
And he will speak peace to the nations,
And his dominion will be from sea to sea
And from the River to the ends of the earth**

When Israel's King came, he would conquer the world, but not by bloody, armed conflict. He would, in fact, take away Israel's armament and bring peace in quite another way. Zechariah promised that Messiah would come conquering on his own unique "war horse," a donkey. The key to understanding this conquest is the symbolic donkey: Messiah would conquer through some humbling act. However, the act, though demeaning to the King, would in the end bring about the conquest of the entire world. Zechariah goes on in verses 11-13 to assure God's people that this conquest would be theirs as well. God would stir up Israel against Greece and they would become his weapons — bows, arrows and swords — to subdue this proud people.

Returning now to the Triumphal Entry in John 12, we see that the people who greeted Jesus missed the point entirely. They expected a Messiah who would bring about a political solution to their problem. The Jews had had enough of Rome. They were ready to revolt; all they needed was an incendiary personality to lead them. Aware of the mood of the people, of their restlessness and readiness to react, the Jewish officials rightly feared for the nation (Jn. 11:48). Israel would feel the weight of Rome's wrath and military might if Jesus chose to lead that revolt.

But Jesus planned no armed uprising against Rome; he had another way of bringing peace and freedom. When he came, in fulfillment of the prophecies of his kingship, he wasn't riding on a war-horse, but on a donkey. That was why he stopped his progress to the city and had the disciples find him a donkey to ride. He wanted the Jews to remember the prediction and the way of world conquest envisioned by the prophet Zechariah. His way was the way of the donkey — in humiliation, embarrassment, indignity, and ultimately, death on a cross. His only scepter was a broken reed; his only crown a crown of thorns; his only throne a bloody cross.

But Israel didn't understand. She missed her chance. Jesus, we know, was heartbroken. The other gospels record that what his disciples thought was a Triumphal Entry was in fact a tragedy. While the crowd cheered him, he wept for them. When he came over the brow of the mountain and saw the city lying beneath, tears rolled down his cheeks. Luke records his words:

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Lk. 19:40-44)

Jesus foresaw the fall of Jerusalem — the siege of the city, the tragic plight of the suffering, starving children, and the city's utter destruction — all as a result of the fact that the Jews did not recognize the time of God's coming. They didn't understand Zechariah's prophecy. They didn't recognize the way of the cross. Neither did the disciples; they didn't understand until later.

Now John immediately links this with another event that probably occurred a day or two later during this strategic week: the visit of certain Greeks to the feast. Verse 20:

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." Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came, and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Isn't that interesting? Proud Greeks, notorious truth seekers, came seeking Jesus. They probably had come into contact with the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they were drawn by their purity and the clear message of the greatness of God. At the time of the feast they went to celebrate along with the Jews. Remember the outer court of the Temple was called "the court of the Gentiles." They couldn't go beyond that court for fear of their lives. They probably approached Philip (because he had a Greek name), seeking an interview with Jesus. Philip told Andrew, and Andrew told Jesus. Their request provoked an unusual response from our Lord. He had not been pleased with the Triumphal Entry, but when he heard that a group of Gentiles wanted to see him, here was his remarkable comment: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (to be recognized; to come into his own)." "This is it!" says Jesus, in effect, "this is what I came for. My hour has come!"

Several times in this gospel we saw that Jesus said to his disciples and to others that "his hour had not yet come" (4:4;7:6,8,30; 8:20). Now he says that his hour (the hour for which he came to earth) had finally come. This is his final and finest hour: the hour of his death. John wrote earlier: "God so loved the world that he gave his Son that whoever believes on him might not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16) It was for this reason the Father sent the Son: to die for the sins of the *world*. That hour had now come.

There is a fine irony in the Pharisee's hyperbole in verse 19: "The whole *world* has gone after him." That was true. The Greeks off to the West were the first fruits of that world conquest. And in the verses that follow Jesus told his two disciples how the West, and the rest of the world, would be won. Verse 24:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

This is a metaphor from our world, specifically from the world of nature: a death has to take place before there can be life. If you place a seed in the ground, it will die. But in time, if you watch the place of death, you will see a small green shoot appear; then a plant emerging from the ground; then the ear; and finally, the harvest. If the seed does not die, there can be no harvest.

What did Jesus mean by this? He was referring to himself and his own death. His life was the seed that had to be planted. Unless he went to the cross and was willing to die, he would remain alone. His whole purpose in coming to earth would have been wasted. But if it was put in the ground (and it was), it would bring forth much fruit. These Gentiles who had approached him were the first-fruits of that great harvest that would be gathered in from all over the world. And, as Zechariah predicted, the cities on the coastal plain were gathered in. We learn this in the Book of Acts. Luke wrote that after Jesus was glorified, Philip "found himself at Azatos [the Roman name for the city of Ashdod] and as he passed through he kept preaching to all the [coastal] cit-

ies" (Acts 8:40). So Zechariah's prophecy of *ingathering* was quite literally fulfilled. The seed was put in the ground: Jesus died, and the harvest followed. Philip went to the Philistines; Paul to the Romans and the Greeks; Thomas to India; Mark to North Africa. And the harvest goes on to this day because Jesus was willing to lay his life in the ground.

Our Lord explained the metaphor in verse 25:

"He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.

A man's life is the seed. Loving life is protecting it — pandering to self-interest, refusing to lay it down. And, as Jesus indicated, if one tries to spare his life, he will destroy it in the end.

In verse 26, Jesus widens the application to include us.

"If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

Being a Christian involves dying. You don't become a follower of Jesus by doing good deeds, or any deeds. There is one thing and only one thing you must do: come to the cross and die. There is no other gospel. That is the great Christian paradox: the only way to have life is to lose it, to put an end to our own efforts to save ourselves and accept his death and our own.

These words of Jesus cut right across the philosophy of our world today. Magazine articles, television commercials, popular songs, almost everything we read and hear shout at us the one message: save yourself! Your life is your own. Live it the way you please. Look out for number one. This is the philosophy that the movie actress Shirley Maclaine espouses in these words,

The most pleasurable journey you can take is through yourself. The only sustaining love is with yourself. When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you've been and where you're going, when you look at your work, your marriage, your children, your pain, your happiness, what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself. The only thing you have is the working toward your own consummation of your own identity. That's what I've been trying to do all my life.

But this is the very antithesis of what Jesus said on this occasion of the not so Triumphal Entry. If we live life this way, he said, in the end we'll lose it all; it will slip through our fingers. We can gain all the wealth we ever dreamed of, all the plaudits of the world, but if we live that way we will end up with nothing; life will be a waste. We can't avoid the process. There is no other way. Without the cross, it can't be done. Jesus said, "If any one serves me, let him follow me." And Jesus went by way of the cross. There is no other way.

A. W. Tozer put it well when he wrote,

The cross is the symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of the human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down

the road had already said good-bye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going out to have his life redirected. He was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing. It slew all of the man and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck hard and swift, and when it had finished its work, the man was no more. That evangelism that draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of man is false to the Bible and cruel to the souls of the hearers. The faith of Christ does not parallel the world. It intersects it. In coming to Christ we do not bring our life up to a higher plane. We must leave it at the cross. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. That is the beginning of the gospel.

And we should note that dying to ourselves is not a once-for-all thing. Dying to self is the Christian way of life. It is a life-style. Dying is not merely a way of getting in, but an on-going thing: "If anyone serves me, he will keep following me (in the way of the cross)," said Jesus.

This principle is true of a church as well. If we try to hang onto people, we'll lose them in the end. They're not ours to hold onto; they belong to God. It's much better to give them away to serve in other places as God directs. As we say good-bye today to Ron and Joyce Williams, we feel sad. They are going far away. But there is a church somewhere in Michigan that will be stronger and richer through our loss, and God's kingdom will advance.

But dying comes hard, doesn't it? Nobody wants to die. John Fischer put it this way in one of his songs,

*You want to have wisdom without making mistakes.
You want to have money without the work that it takes.
You want to be loved but you don't want the heartaches.
You want to be forgiven without taking the blame.
You want to eat forbidden fruit without leaving a stain.
You want the glory but you don't want the shame.
You want to be a winner without taking a loss.*

*You want to be a disciple without counting the cost
You want to follow Jesus but you don't want to go to the cross.*

Everyone wants to get to heaven, Lord; Nobody wants to die.

But dying is necessary.

Now you would think that if you immersed yourself in the process of dying, you would die. But actually, you don't. It's the other way around: those who try to maintain their lives are the ones who die. Those who insist on their rights, who never give in, who lavish care on themselves, who are obsessed with looking out for themselves, are almost always insecure and unhealthy. But if we die to ourselves for Jesus' sake, our self-worth will not suffer. It is because God grants worth to us. In fact, the people who are the most secure and feel the most significant are those who, like Jesus, have given themselves up for others. Jesus was right: trying to find yourself is suicidal. Only that which dies can be resurrected. So dying is the only way to go.

We gain ground by giving it up. If we look for love, we won't find it. But if we give love away, we'll be loved. If we search for a friend, we won't find one. Proverbs says, "A man of many friends comes to ruin." But if we befriend another, we'll have a good friend. If you woke up this morning singing, "Nobody loves me, everyone hates me, guess I'll eat some worms," you began in the wrong place.

If you are one who is constantly looking for others to encourage you, you may be looking forever. The way to be encouraged is to encourage others. It appears backward to us, but that's the way it is. Jesus said so, and he lived it. "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." He was dying all of his life. His not so Triumphant Entry teaches us an important lesson: the way of victory is the way of the donkey. Losing is winning. ABC doesn't tell us, but Jesus does, that the thrill of victory comes through the agony of defeat. Remember that today when you have to say no to yourself.

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