

Who Is This Humble King?

Matthew 21:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 29, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.”

⁴This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵“Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

¹¹The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matthew 21:1-11, NRSV)

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We all know that point in a good movie when you realize that you are about to reach the climax. The whole movie has been building towards this pinnacle and there's usually that one scene, that one line of dialogue, that one interaction that indicates that you've arrived. In an action movie it's the final battle or the completion of the quest. The hero is finally going to take on and defeat the great evil. In a romantic comedy it's the point at which this couple is *finally* going to get

together for good. The slow-witted guy at last comes to his senses and races to the airport before her plane leaves.

If you read Matthew's Gospel from the beginning, and have at least some understanding of what you are reading, the passage we just read is the point in the drama when it happens, when you know the climax is finally coming. You know because there have been so many hints, so much foreshadowing, along the way. This scene of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey has long been considered the beginning of the Passion account for a reason. All the actors are in place. The scene has been set. The prompts have been delivered. The climax is ready to unfold.

This is Passover week in Jerusalem, the greatest of all annual feasts in ancient Israel. Jerusalem in those days likely had between 50,000 and 100,000 residents. Scholars estimate that during Passover, up to several hundred thousand additional pilgrims poured into the city. They were all there to remember and celebrate the most epic event in the Old Testament, God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. In other words, everybody has deliverance on their minds. Because all these years later Israel was now subject to another foreign power, this time Rome. Nationalistic hopes for freedom and redemption from Roman occupation would most certainly have been running high.

Add to this the fact that for some time now rumors have been circulating that perhaps this Jesus from Nazareth might be the Messiah, the promised one finally come to bring this deliverance. He's as good a candidate that has come along in many, many years. He makes blind people see. He casts out demons like they were playthings. He meets on mountaintops with Moses and Elijah. He feeds thousands of people with a little boy's sack lunch. He walks on water and controls the weather. He heals incurable diseases. He raises the dead. And on top of it all, he teaches with the sort of authority never seen in those days. In many ways he fits the part.

Yet in other ways, he's nothing like what people expected in a Messiah. He goes to dinner parties with the dregs of society: sex workers, traitors, criminals. He even calls such people to be in his inner circle. He

touches lepers. He challenges the status quo. He doesn't seem to even care about political power. And on top of it all, he never talks about revolution, at least the sort of revolution Israel was hoping for. Instead, he keeps talking about dying. Matthew records three separate times when Jesus tells his disciples straight out that they are headed to Jerusalem not to lead a political uprising, but so the he can be arrested by the religious authorities, flogged, and crucified.¹

Whether or not he fits the part of Messiah, Matthew wants us to anticipate that he is, and the climax of his deliverance is just about to come. Matthew cues us to this when he tells us that when Jesus and his disciples come near Jerusalem, they go to the Mount of Olives. This is no throwaway detail. The ancient Messianic prophesy from Zechariah 14:4 declared, **“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives.”**² Even the geography is crying out, “Here he is! This is it!”

We are then told that when they arrive, Jesus sends two of his disciples (he always sends us out in at least pairs!) with some very specific instructions. In the next village, right on the edge of town, there will be a donkey with her colt tied up next to her. They are to bring them both to Jesus. And if anybody says to them, “Hey, that’s not your donkey!”, they are to simply tell them that the Lord needs them. Immediately the disciples go and do as they are told.

It’s such a simple command, such an ordinary errand, but it holds so much meaning. There are at least two crucial things we learn here. First, this is just another reminder that Jesus is in control of his destiny and mission. He’s not only the star of the movie, he wrote the script and now he is directing each scene. There are more than 300 Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, nearly 30 in the last 24 hours of his life.³ Matthew quotes Zechariah here to make sure we don’t miss this particular fulfillment,

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**⁴

To put it plainly, Jesus does not enter into Jerusalem as a victim. The people will see him that way. He is not. He is orchestrating his own death, fulfilling the will of

God which was determined before the beginning of time. And everybody will fall in line with the plan, not only the disciples on this simple errand here, but also the corrupt disciple who betrays him, the other disciples who desert him, the spite-filled Jewish leaders who come after him, the fickle crowds who turn against him, the gutless Roman authorities who let it all happen, all the way down to the soldiers following orders to drive spikes into his hands and feet. All of it exactly according to his plan.

The second thing we learn here has to do with a question which may have already come into your mind. How does Jesus know that there will be two donkeys waiting in the next village? Scholars and students alike have debated this question for years. Some say he did here what any of us would do. He pre-arranged with the owner of these animals to have them waiting there at this particular time so that he could borrow them for the day. Others, however, have a more supernatural explanation. Perhaps Jesus, being God, just knew there would be two donkeys there, and then moved to silence anybody who might raise an objection to their acquisition.⁵

Both explanations are plausible, right? Jesus is divine and has already demonstrated unprecedented supernatural power. Making two donkeys available at a specified time would have been one of his less impressive miracles! On the other hand, Jesus doesn’t just go around doing miracles to accomplish everything. As a carpenter, he used his hands to ply his craft, just like any other carpenter. He traveled by foot, cooked and ate his food, sweat, wept, bathed, and did most things the way most of us do things.

So which is it? Maybe Matthew, in not telling us how Jesus did this, wants us to hold these two possibilities in tension. Maybe he’s setting us up. You see, the very fact that Jesus wants to ride into town to much fanfare, but to do so on the back of a donkey, serves to further highlight this tension. You see, in those days, a victorious king would ride like this into town as a way to convey power and authority. Think of how world leaders show up in our day. They don’t pull up in the back of an Uber. There is always great pageantry surrounding their arrival. It’s the same here. Jesus gets on the back of this animal and allows himself to be carried into town. Actually, he doesn’t *allow* this to happen, he *instructs* that this should happen. And when the crowds start laying down their clothes to pave the way (the ancient version of a red carpet), and cut palm

¹ See Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19.

² This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

³ For a list go to <https://www.newtestamentchristians.com/bible-study-resources/351-old-testament-prophecies-fulfilled-in-jesus-christ/>

⁴ Zechariah 9:9

⁵ I’m indebted here to Fredrick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2, (Eerdmans, 1990), 353.

branches to wave before him (the ancient version of a ticker-tape parade), and shout out ancient prophecies reserved only for God's Messiah, he doesn't stop them. He rides along and seemingly soaks it all in, just like any rightful king would do.

On the other hand, most kings, when they road like this into town, would come on the back of a warhorse. You can see why. Which is more impressive, a warhorse or a donkey? A stallion was a symbol of military and political power. A donkey was a beast of burden. It's not that important people never road donkeys in those days. They did. You may remember that Solomon himself rode on a donkey when he was going to be anointed as king.⁶ But when a king rode on a donkey, he was not coming to conquer or rule over, but to serve and to extend peace, not to terrify or oppress, but to take the burdens of the people and carry them himself. In other words, Jesus rides into town as a king, but as a humble king.

In his marvelous little book, *Why I Am a Christian*, John Stott makes a statement which, at first, I found hard to swallow. He writes, "Without doubt the most noteworthy feature of the teaching of Jesus was its quite extraordinary self-centeredness."⁷ By teaching, he means both the things Jesus said *and* the things Jesus did, because of course in both ways he was always teaching. Do you agree? Is that how you think of Jesus, as self-centered? Stott goes on to make his case. Jesus, he points out, was always talking about himself. He's right. Read the Gospels and you'll see this is true. He talked a lot about God's Kingdom, but then made clear that it could not be accessed apart from him. He spoke about God as father, but then added that he was the Father's "Son." The great "I Am" statements in John, each of which was a play on the sacred name of God himself, "I Am who I Am," were spoken by Jesus to put himself in the divine spotlight. The whole world is hungry; *I am* the bread of life.⁸ Everybody is in darkness; *I am* the light of the world.⁹ Death is coming to everybody; *I am* the resurrection.¹⁰ *I am* the way. *I am* the truth. *I am* the life.¹¹ He doesn't just lead us to these things or point us to these things, *he is these things*. "Come to *me!*" he keeps saying. "Follow *me!*". It's "I, I, I...me, me, me." If you or I talked like this people would want to avoid us.

But here's where the tension comes in. Though blatantly self-centered, Jesus, *at the very same time*, was

stunningly humble. His claims sound proud; his actions and life are clothed in meekness. We see this perhaps most poignantly on the last night of his life, an event we will celebrate Thursday, when Jesus is in the upper room and straight-out tells his disciples that he is their Lord, their teacher, their judge. But then almost in the same breath he takes off his robe, wraps a towel around his waist, and begins to do for them what only the lowest of low slaves would do in those days, he washes their feet.¹² You can see that they don't know what to do with this paradox. Peter outright refuses, saying, "**Lord, are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.**"¹³ You're too high above me! What are you doing down below me?

Here's how John Stott puts it, "There have been lots of arrogant people, but they have all behaved like it. There have also been humble people, but they have not made great claims about themselves. It is the combination of egocentricity and humility that is so startling."¹⁴ Here is a self-proclaimed king riding into town to the adoration of the crowds, but riding in on a beast of burden. It leaves us wondering, if everything is pointing to this scene setting up the climax of the story, how is the hero going to win the day? We know how a mighty king wins the day, by conquering the enemy with power. But how does a humble servant win the day? Who rides into battle on the back of a donkey?

As Jesus makes his way into town, the people cry out, "**Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!**" They aren't making this up. These words come from Psalm 118, which was used every year during Passover. It was a prayer that emphasized God's saving power and enduring love. Worshippers would process daily around the altar and recite this psalm. "Son of David" is a messianic reference, reminding us that the Messiah was to come from the kingly line of David. The reference isn't in the original psalm, but added here to highlight the expectations of the people that day. The word *Hosanna*, the centerpiece of the crowd's response to Jesus, is a word that literally means, "O save us now!"¹⁵ It's both a plea and a shout of triumph, a cry for deliverance framed with the expectation that deliverance is coming.

But the crowds add an interesting phrase. "**Hosanna!**" they cry out, "**Hosanna in the highest heaven!**". Biblical commentators point out that this is a plea for

⁶ See 1st Kings 1:33-45

⁷ John Stott, *Why I Am a Christian* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), 35. This is a small book, but well worth the read! It's especially helpful for those open to exploring the Christian faith.

⁸ John 6:35, 48

⁹ John 8:12, 9:5

¹⁰ John 11:25

¹¹ John 14:6

¹² See John 13:1-11

¹³ John 13:6,8

¹⁴ Stott, 46

¹⁵ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5614.htm>

not just salvation, but for *the best salvation possible*. “God, save us in the best way! We are in an unusually dire situation here, so we need an unusually potent salvation.”¹⁶ Just imagine if they had received from Jesus what *they* wanted from him, if they had been allowed to script the climax. Jesus comes in as a conquering king and leads an uprising that overthrows Roman occupation and seizes military and political power. If that happened, how would things in this world have really changed? Or what if Jesus comes in as merely a humble servant and dies the death of a martyr, inspiring the masses to also die the death of a martyr for a worthy cause. Again, how would things in this world really have changed?

The Humble King was about to answer their prayers, but in a way nobody could have ever scripted. Amidst these cries for the best salvation possible, Jesus enters the city for the last time and when he arrives Matthew tells us that the whole city was in turmoil. The Greek word translated “turmoil” is the word *σεισμός*.¹⁷ It’s where we get the English word “seismic,” because it literally means “to quake.” It’s a word meant to describe a violent, disturbing shaking of what was thought to be immovable. I was in the middle of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, inside of a massive building I never imagined could move in the ways I saw it move. That’s what was happening when King Jesus comes riding into town on the back of a donkey. Things that nobody ever imagined could ever move begin to move.

You’ve heard of aftershocks, quaking that happens to the earth after the big one hits. Well these are foreshocks, tremors that are signaling that the big one is coming. In fact, Matthew uses this same word twice more in his account of those following days. When Jesus, the King of Kings, bleeds to death on a cross made of wood which came from a tree he himself created, Matthew tells us that immediately this happens: **“At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.”**¹⁸ That’s the very same word. At the moment when the righteous King dies the death of a sinner, the seemingly immovable is shaken to the foundation, the creative order unsettled once and for all to serve God’s sovereign purposes. Life is never going to be the same. Death itself has just been executed.

Then in Matthew 28, when the women discover the tomb that once held Jesus’ body is empty and find there instead an angel of the Lord sitting on top of the rolled-

away stone, blazing white like lighting, Matthew tells us, **“For fear of [the angel] the guards shook and became like dead men.”**¹⁹ Again, same word. At the moment when the dead King is discovered to have actually conquered death, the witnesses are shaken to the core.

In the book of Revelation, John, in his stunning vision of what God, through Christ, will ultimately do when he comes again on that great day of judgment, picks up this theme when he writes in Revelation 6:12-13, **“There was a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.”** Same word. But this time, at the end of time, the shaking is not limited to a city in turmoil, or terrified guards outside an empty tomb, but has now become cosmic, universal, permanent and comprehensive. This is unusual salvation, the best possible salvation, salvation beyond what anybody could have ever imagined, and was all made possible because the one who rode into town as King came riding into town on a donkey, because the one who came to conquer the great enemies of evil, sin and death came to do so by giving himself over in death to those very enemies.

And in the end the people ask, “Who is this?” His name is Jesus; we know that. He’s from Nazareth in Galilee. We know that too. Clearly he’s some sort of prophet, maybe even *the* prophet. But who is he really? Is he more than that? Is he just that?

I suggest to you that there is no more important question you will ever answer in your life. I assume you’re here this morning because you at least consider it a question worth asking, maybe even one you’re trying to answer for yourself right now. Maybe I can help you with the answer. Again, has anybody in the history of the world ever spoken with such unabashed self-centeredness as Jesus did when he spoke about himself? Not even close. And yet, has anybody in the history of the world ever humbled himself or herself to such an extent as Jesus humbled himself, from heaven to hell, righteousness to sin, blessing to curse, creator of life to the darkness of death? Again, not even close.

Beyond that, when somebody dies, even somebody of great fame and influence, normally their impact and influence on the world immediately begins to wane. Even most kings are eventually forgotten. This man was different. Historians point out that 100 years after

¹⁶ Bruner, 357. Some early church fathers believed that this could be translated, “Bring salvation to the remotest ends!”. They believed that what was needed was for God not just to redeem humanity, but to redeem all of creation. It’s hard to argue with their point.

¹⁷ <https://biblehub.com/greek/4579.htm>

¹⁸ Matthew 27:51

¹⁹ Matthew 28:4

his death, Jesus' impact had actually increased dramatically. It was even greater 500 years later. Now 2,000 years later, the world is a radically different place because of him.²⁰ Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western Culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull out of the history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?"²¹ Not much.

Countless cities and hospitals and colleges are named after him or his followers. We set the year of our calendar by the date of his birth. His teachings have transformed the way we treat women, and slaves, and the poor. Democracy itself was influenced by the ways he understood people. Even humility, a characteristic largely scorned in the ancient world because it was seen as a sign of weakness, is now championed as a virtue because he held it up as one.

The whole world has been quaking ever since Jesus the King chose a donkey over a warhorse, and then choose a cross over a throne. When he returns one day, this time riding on the clouds, we shall then see everything dark, everything evil, everything wretched, even death itself, shaken once and for all out of existence.

Who is this? Who is this King who comes to us exalted and humble all at once?

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 21:1-11 again. This may be a very familiar story, so try to read it with fresh eyes, looking for things which you may not have noticed before. What stands out to you?
2. Do your best to picture Jesus riding into town on the back of this donkey as all these people shower him with expectant praise. What comes to mind? What questions do you have? Why is he doing this?

3. If Jesus came riding into our town today, how do you think he would arrive? What would you cry out to him along the way?
4. What do you think of the claim that Jesus' teaching is extraordinarily self-centered? What does this tell us about him? How is it possible for Jesus to be so self-centered and yet so humble?
5. This same crowd which shouted praise as Jesus entered Jerusalem shouted "Crucify him!" not even a week later. What changed?
6. Who is this man? What is your answer to that question these days? Try to put it as simply and clearly as you are able. And not just who Jesus is theologically, but who Jesus is to you personally.
7. Consider this famous quote from C.S. Lewis about the nature and person of Christ. What's your response?

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²²

8. What is the main thing you think Jesus is saying to you through this message? How will that lead you to live or think differently?

Table to Table: Something for kids and adults to consider together.



Reread the account of Palm Sunday in Matthew 21:1-11. Why does Jesus choose to ride into town on a donkey that day? What is he teaching us?

²⁰ I'm borrowing here from John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* (Zondervan, 2012), 11.

²¹ Cited by Ortberg, 14.

²² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, 1942), 52.