

Build Your Kingdom Here!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

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Mark 11:1–11 (CEB)

When Jesus and his followers approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives. Jesus gave two disciples a task, ²saying to them, “Go into the village over there. As soon as you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘Its master needs it, and he will send it back right away.’”

⁴They went and found a colt tied to a gate outside on the street, and they untied it.

⁵Some people standing around said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶They told them just what Jesus said, and they left them alone. ⁷They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes upon it, and he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread out their clothes on the road while others spread branches cut from the fields. ⁹Those in front of him and those following were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰Blessings on the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest!”

¹¹Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.

Colossians 1:9–14 (CEB)

⁹Because of this [the love evident among the Colossian believers], since the day we heard about you, we haven’t stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding. ¹⁰We’re praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹by being strengthened through his glorious might so that you endure everything and have patience; ¹²and by giving thanks with joy to the Father. He made it so you could take part in the inheritance, in light granted to God’s holy people. ¹³He rescued us from the control of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. ¹⁴He set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

With the palm-waving crowds we shout: Build your kingdom here!

The crowds are gathered outside the city walls of Jerusalem, at the eastern gate. They are ready and they are pumped! The day has come. At long last, when it seemed that God would never hear their cries, God has sent his Messiah, his anointed one. This king, from the house of David, would inaugurate a true God-intended kingdom and set about to put the world right. At long last, the Jews would be free of their hated Roman oppressors. At long last, the temple would be cleansed of all the money-grubbing, ambitious pagan influences. At long last God’s king was arriving, ready to be welcomed into the city as a king should be welcomed. Hosanna¹, indeed! Build your kingdom here!

As for Jesus, he purposely wraps all these messianic symbols around himself: the colt, the ride through the city gates, the palm branches, the cloaks laid out in front of him, the shouted Hosannas. All of it. And for the first time, Jesus refers to himself as “Lord” (Mark 11:3). The waiting is over; the time has come. The kingdom has arrived.

Have you ever waited so long for something that you could hardly stand it, that you thought you’d burst? Or worse, you gave up hope that the time would come at all. I can remember waiting for Christmas as a young boy. Each day after Thanksgiving seemed to last a week. By Dec 22 or so, my anticipation was so worked up that it was all I could to hang on. And, of course, as any wise person would tell you, no matter how wonderful Christmas actually was, it could never really match up to my expectation.

I guess it was a bit like that for the Jews in Jesus day. They had waited so long for the arrival of their Savior, their Redeemer, their Messiah (see the page three textbox). Indeed, there had been a few would-be messiahs in the decades before Jesus and there would be some

¹ “Hosanna” means “Save us!”

more after his death and resurrection. Now, it was this carpenter from the small village of Nazareth who was putting himself forward as Messiah.

And so he was welcomed by the crowds that turned out on that Sunday before the Passover. Hopes, dreams, expectations . . . all focused on Jesus as he rode that small colt in through the city gates.

And yet, five days later, Jesus was hung on a Roman cross to die after being ridiculed by Jerusalem crowds. Granted, we can't know how many from the crowds on Sunday were present in the crowds on Friday. But the question remains, why was the city not swept up in messianic fervor as the week proceeded?

Why? Because Jesus, God's Messiah, was not what they expected. They wanted a king who would lead them to victory against their pagan oppressors and cleanse God's temple of he corrupt priests. Instead, Jesus would bring them God's victory over sin and death as he hung on that cross. So, perhaps Palm Sunday is a good time for us all to think about our own expectations of Jesus.

The Letter to the Colossians

Colossae was located about 110 miles east of Ephesus on a major east-west highway cutting across southern Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Though once the most important city in its region, by Paul's day Colossae had been overshadowed by Laodicea (see Revelation 3:14-22) and Hierapolis. In the early 60's AD, the region was struck by a major earthquake and Colossae never really recovered.

Because letters like this one can only reflect one side of the conversation, disputes rage regarding what Paul is responding to in his letter. But regardless of the exact nature of the problems, Paul points the reader directly to Jesus Christ. In this letter, Paul dwells more upon Jesus Christ – his divinity and his creative and redemptive work – than in any other of Paul's letters. For example, the paragraph immediately following today's scripture passage is one of Paul's classic statements about the nature and work of Jesus Christ (1:15-20)

You may wonder why I include what seems to be historical trivia in these studies – like Colossae's earthquake. I do so because many of us have little idea that some NT "books," like Colossians, are real letters written to real people in real places to deal with specific and troubling problems. It is my hope that a few details will help make all this "Bible stuff" seem a little more real to you!

It is easy to shape Jesus into a savior who meets our perceived needs and expectations, who is a Rorschach blot waiting to be brought to life. Certainly, scholars on Jesus have this problem. In their research, they often find the "historical" Jesus that they are looking for.

Why should we think that we are exempt from the same problem? God inspired the writings of the New Testament so that, in them, we can meet and welcome into our lives the genuine article, the Jesus-who-is. And like those first palm-wavers, we better prepare ourselves to be surprised; the new believers in Colossae certainly were.

A kingdom prayer

In the course of his missionary journeys, Paul was usually a disturber of the peace and was often imprisoned for it. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are all letters that Paul wrote from prison. When Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Colossae, we can be sure that he would much rather have been with them. Instead, Paul must be content with writing to them and, more importantly, praying for them.

Paul prays that the Colossians will grow in knowledge and wisdom so that they will delight God with their good works and the fruit of their faith in Christ, such as joy, gentleness, peace, and patience. By maturing as Christians, they will be stronger and able to endure patiently whatever is thrown at them. But most importantly, Paul prays that the Colossians will lead lives of joyful gratitude, giving thanks to the Father for the gift of their inheritance, the gift of God's grace that has enabled them to be adopted as children of God. All this marks out the Colossians

believers as those who are actively striving to build for God's kingdom. Actually building his kingdom, consummating the marriage of heaven and earth, is God's work. But for 2,000 years God's people have built *for* God's kingdom. We are to do all we can to make this

world shine with love and goodness, with peace and joy, with kindness and forgiveness, with justice and mercy.

In the letter, Paul goes on at length to talk about the spirit of thanksgiving. This is no generic spirit of gratitude. Rather, Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae will always remember that God rescued them, just as he rescued the Hebrews from Egypt long before. For once again, in this *new* exodus, God has redeemed his people and led them into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Once again and for all time, their sins have been forgiven. And, with the Colossians and all believers, we pray to God, “Build Your Kingdom Here!,” even as we do all we can to build for his kingdom.

Longing for a King . . . and a liberator

A thousand years before Jesus, David was king of Israel. David, slayer of Goliath (1 Sam 17). David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam 13:14). David, Israel’s greatest king, to whom God had promised that he would establish the throne of David’s kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:13). *But* . . . four hundred years after David’s death, Jerusalem burned. The Temple built by David’s son, Solomon, lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant was gone. Tens of thousands of God’s people were in exile, including their king, who was blinded by the Babylonians after being forced to watch the execution of his sons.

And for the next six hundred years, there was no king in Israel. Sure, there were pretenders, like the various Herods, who were “kings” only at the pleasure of conquerors. But the people of God knew that they had no true king, no king from the House of David. For centuries, they had traded one oppressor for another. For centuries, the Jews had cherished the stories and promises of the king to come. This true king to come, long promised by the prophets, would be the one anointed by God, the *mashia* in Hebrew, the *christos* in Greek, the Messiah and Christ in English. This true king would be the one through whom God would usher in his kingdom, at which time all the world would see that the Jews’ confidence in their God had not been misplaced.

By the time of Jesus, the expectations and hopes that God’s king would come were so powerful that many Jews tried to hurry things along. Believing that rebellion against the Romans would bring about God’s kingdom, more than a few Jews put themselves forward as the long-awaited *mashia*, gathering around themselves bands of followers. Of course, all these would-be messiahs collided with the Romans, who had no tolerance for anyone who might challenge the authority of Caesar. And all these messianic pretenders were eventually executed by the Romans.

In 27AD or so, one Jew named Jesus, a carpenter from tiny Nazareth, came to Jerusalem with his own band of followers. Differently from all the other revolutionaries, Jesus had not advocated violent revolution against Rome as the path to the Kingdom of God. Instead, for more than two years, Jesus had taught that the true path was the path of mercy not vengeance, and peace not rebellion. Like the prophets of old, Jesus had called the Jews back to God. But unlike those prophets, Jesus had also pointed the Jews to a new way of being God’s people. Not only was he on a collision course with Rome, to whom all revolutionaries were threats, Jesus was also committed to a confrontation with the Jewish leaders who clung to a tragically mistaken way of being God’s people.

As Mark tells us in today’s passage, Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. But, as he had done so often, Jesus used powerful and evocative symbols to make his own claim to messiahship. Hundreds of years before, the prophet Zechariah told of God’s king of peace, who would come to Jerusalem victorious and triumphant, but riding on a humble colt. Thus, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt. We may have trouble seeing Jesus’ arrival at Jerusalem as the coming of a king, but the crowds certainly didn’t. They went outside the city walls to escort him inside, for that was the custom with returning kings. They shouted “Hosanna!” meaning “save us.” They chanted phrases from Psalm 118, a royal psalm offering thanks for victory over Israel’s oppressors. As had been done at the anointing of King Jehu (2 Kings 9:11-13), they laid out cloaks in front of Jesus. They waved palm branches, symbols of abundance and thanks.

The enthusiasm of the crowds was lost on no one. The Pharisees, the keepers of the old way, were obviously frustrated with the whole thing, for they muttered to themselves, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him” (John 12:19).

However, Jesus knew that the enthusiasm of the crowds would soon falter. He knew that unless he gave up his course and abandoned the vocation given him by the Father, his confrontation with the Jewish leadership and the Romans would soon come to a head. But of course, Jesus was faithful to his mission, all the way to that cross only days later, turning a symbol of shame into the place of God’s victory over sin and death.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is hailed as the returning king. But, only a few days later, the crowd shouts “crucify him!” What do you think may explain the crowds’ swift move from an enthusiastic high for Jesus to their abandonment of him? Are there parallels to our own Christian walk? There are times when our own enthusiasm and commitment to Christ are seemingly unbounded – we really feel it! But at other times, the reality of Jesus can seem remote and distant; we feel cold and spiritually dry. Why is this? What can we do to stay more constant in our relationship with God? How do you get through periods of spiritual dryness when you do not feel close to God?
2. The kingdom of God is not just about the future but it is also about the present. It is still coming, but it is present now! In his book, *Rumors*, Philip Yancey urges us to see this as much like two “parallel universes” that, even now, do overlap from time to time and place to place. When you look at St. Andrew right now, what do you see? Do you at all see God’s kingdom present here? In what ways? When? What are some concrete examples? See if you can come up with a list of ten. For example, when our youth go on mission trips, are they not stepping into God’s kingdom, even if just for awhile? What are some other examples? When have you felt like you’ve stepped into God’s kingdom?

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Sermon Notes
