

# “Donkey Business”

Mark 11:1-11, 15-19, 14:53-65 <sup>1</sup>

When President Trump and President Putin met in Helsinki, Finland earlier this year, President Putin took pains to arrive in one of the largest presidential limousines anyone had ever seen. It was especially important, of course, that it be a larger limo than the one President Trump would be using, and it made the anticipated splash in the news. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the last time, the splash was rather different.

Since we saw them with Bartimaeus last week, Jesus and His disciples have walked from Jericho to Jerusalem, a distance of about seventeen miles, with a gain in elevation of more than 3,000 feet. The journey was through the desert, and it was no picnic.

The journey took most people six to eight hours to accomplish, which meant walking through the heat of the day. Pilgrims generally walked as fast as they could manage, because no one wanted to be on that isolated road after nightfall. The Parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us of the dangers of that road.

So it was late in the day when Jesus and His entourage came near to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Jesus sent two unnamed disciples into the village of Bethphage with specific instructions about securing a young donkey that had never been ridden before and bringing it to Him. They found the colt just as Jesus had said, and He sat on the donkey as He entered the city.

It's remarkable enough that an unbroken colt would allow Jesus to ride it without protest, but there was much more going on than this. The young donkey was calm, not just with a rider, but in a noisy crowd, because the rider was He whose hand guides galaxies, stars, planets . . . and donkeys.

Jesus didn't ride the donkey because He was tired. Jesus rode the donkey to fulfill Zechariah's prophecy: *Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (Zechariah 9:9).

In those days, kings entered cities on war horses or in chariots if they came in conquest. In more peaceful times, it was more likely that the king would ride a donkey or a mule. Jesus was entering the city as its King, the King of Peace. The disciples didn't understand what Jesus was doing at the time, but later they remembered and understood (John 12:16).

Jesus was well-known to many of the people, and Messianic expectations always ran high at Passover; so as Jesus approached Jerusalem on the donkey, the crowds began to

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 9, 2018. Parallel and related passages include: Matthew 21:1-17, 26:57-68; Luke 19:28-38, 45-48, 22:67-71; John 2:13-22, 12:12-19, 18:12-13, 19-24; also Psalm 118:26; Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Zechariah 9:9.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

<sup>2</sup> This is the Synoptic chronology. John suggests that Jesus arrived at Bethany before sundown on Friday (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19).

spread their cloaks on the road, rather like a red carpet today, while others waved leafy branches and shouted, *Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!* (Mark 11:9-10).

These were clearly Messianic accolades, and Jesus accepted them, but He also knew that they wouldn't last long. The people acclaimed Him as Messiah today, but they had no category in which to put a Suffering Messiah; and when it came to blood and pain and suffering later in the week, the crowds would be very different indeed.

In Luke's account of Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem, some of the Pharisees in the crowd told Jesus to restrain His disciples from such frenzy; to which Jesus answered, "*If they were to keep silent, the stones would cry out!*" (Luke 19:39-40). This statement about the stones was a figure of speech, but it does remind us that creation itself shares in our human travail.<sup>3</sup>

And only Luke recorded Jesus' lament over the city: as Jesus approached and saw the city, He wept for it, saying, "*If you knew this day what would bring peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. For the days will come on you when your enemies will build a barricade around you, surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you and your children among you to the ground, and they will not leave one stone on another in your midst, because you did not recognize the time when God visited you*" (Luke 19:41-44). A few decades later, the Roman army would destroy Jerusalem in just this way, and the Temple would be gone forever.

Mark recorded that Jesus entered the city, went to the Temple, looked around at everything, and then went out to Bethany with the Twelve. Jesus stayed with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (now raised from the dead) during this final week, going into the city during the day and back to Bethany most evenings.

On Monday, *they came to Jerusalem, and he went into the temple and began to throw out those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, and would not permit anyone to carry goods through the temple. He was teaching them: "Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of thieves!?"*<sup>4</sup>

*The chief priests and the scribes heard it and started looking for a way to kill him. For they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was astonished by his teaching* (Mark 11:15-18).

This, too, was the fulfillment of prophecy. Malachi had prophesied centuries before, "*See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,*" says the LORD of Armies. *But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire and like launderer's bleach* (Malachi 3:1-2).

When I think about this scene, I think about the Central Market in Kumasi, Ghana, a large expanse of crowded and noisy commerce. There was a genuine need for such commerce, because those who traveled to Passover in Jerusalem did need to change their money into the coinage of the Temple, and they did need to purchase sacrificially-acceptable animals—they just didn't have to be doing all that in the Court of the Gentiles, within the Temple precincts.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul's comments in Romans 8:18-23.

<sup>4</sup> Cp. Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11.

There was probably thievery going on, as Jesus suggested, but the greater problem was that all this was preventing Gentiles such as we are from being able to worship at all. This was the only area of the Temple mount where Gentiles could go.

The text does not suggest that the disciples or anyone else assisted Jesus in this effort at cleansing, so it's unlikely that He turned over every table in the whole Court of the Gentiles; but He certainly caused a commotion and attracted attention.<sup>5</sup> By this action, Jesus was asserting His own authority as superior to the authority of the Temple leaders, and indeed, over the Temple itself and all of its practices.<sup>6</sup>

Fast forward now to Thursday night. We'll look at the rest of the week another day, but for this morning, I want to combine Jesus' confrontation with the Sanhedrin with His Triumphal Entry and His cleansing the Temple. Jesus' confrontations with the Jewish leaders escalated all week long, and thanks to Judas' willingness to betray Jesus, the High Priest's soldiers were able to arrest Jesus late Thursday night, when there were no adoring crowds to protest and to protect Him.

Many books have been written about the things that happened that night. The night was full of interviews and arraignments, and much of this may have been, strictly speaking, contrary to Jewish law. But the situation, as the High Priest saw it, was not very different from how our own government rationalized water boarding suspected terrorists—this was a matter of urgent national security, and desperate times sometimes require desperate measures.

So, late that night, Jesus was brought before members of the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial body of the Jewish people. *The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they could not find any. For many were giving false testimony against him, and the testimonies did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, stating, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another not made by hands.'" Yet their testimony did not agree even on this.*

*Then the high priest stood up before them all and questioned Jesus, "Don't you have an answer to what these men are testifying against you?" But he kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest questioned him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"*

*"I am," said Jesus, "and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."*

*Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your decision?" They all condemned him as deserving death (Mark 14:55-64).*

We've already noted that the Jews had no real conception of a suffering Messiah, and they still do not to this day, Isaiah 53 notwithstanding. The Jewish people did not—and do

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<sup>5</sup> The Synoptics place this event on Monday of Passion Week, while John puts it early in Jesus' ministry. It's hard to know whether Jesus did this once or twice, with John telling the story differently for the purpose of his story line; but beyond banning Jesus from the Temple courts altogether, there was not much the authorities could do to prevent this happening more than once. Jeremiah had once done something rather similar in those same courts (Jeremiah 19).

<sup>6</sup> That authority would be graphically displayed a few days later when the heavy curtain—thirty feet tall—that separated the Holy of Holies would be torn in two—from top to bottom, not from bottom to top—at the moment of His death (Matthew 27:51).

not—expect their Messiah to be divine, and they regarded Jesus’ claim to be divine as blasphemous and worthy of death.

In Jesus’ response to the High Priest, He claimed to be God’s promised Messiah. He claimed to be the Son of God. His reference to coming on the clouds of heaven was a reference to one of Daniel’s Messianic visions, and the High Priest understood what Jesus was saying. Here’s what Daniel said:

*I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. He was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).<sup>7</sup>*

What the manipulated witnesses had been unable to do, Jesus did Himself: He gave the Sanhedrin the testimony they needed to convict Him. Jesus sent Himself to the Cross.

Now here’s the deal. The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus because He claimed to be God. This is not news to us, because we know that Jesus also said, “*If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. The Father and I are One*” (John 10:30, 14:9). We’re so familiar with this idea that we may no longer be paying attention to what we mean when we say it.

Last week we looked at *Life’s Second Most Important Question: “What do you want me to do for you?”*; but today, we come again to *Life’s Most Important Question: “Who do YOU say that I am?”*

C. S. Lewis famously pointed out that if a man claims to be God, then that claim is either true or false. If it is false, then that man either knows it is false or else he doesn’t. A man who claims to be God but knows that this is untrue is a liar, a manipulator, and a cheat. A man who claims to be God but does not know that this is untrue has taken leave of his senses and has become insane. But if the evidence is that Jesus was neither insane nor a manipulative liar and cheat, then the only remaining option is that He IS who He said He IS.

And today, like the High Priest, like the Sanhedrin, and like Pontius Pilate, each of us has to decide for ourselves WHO JESUS IS. We may or may not be alive on the earth when Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven, but we will each stand before Him, one by one.

The claims Jesus made for Himself require decision. To attempt to be neutral is to decide against Him. Jesus was fairly low-key during His years among us. The scenes we’ve looked at this morning were about as dramatic as He ever got with respect to His true identity. But we know enough and have seen enough to be without excuse.

So what does it mean if Jesus really is who He says He is? Lee Strobel, a former atheist, has written that:

1. If Jesus really is the Son of God, then His teachings are more than just good ideas from a wise teacher; they are divine insights on which I can confidently build my life.
2. If Jesus really is God in human flesh, then He sets the standard for human morality. I can now have an unwavering foundation for my choices and decisions, rather than basing them on the ever-shifting sands of expediency and self-centeredness.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Psalm 110:1-2; Matthew 24:29-31.

3. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, then He's still alive today and is available for me to know on a personal basis.
4. If Jesus really did conquer death, then He can open the door of eternal life for me, too.
5. If Jesus really has divine power, then He has the supernatural ability to guide me and help me and transform me as I follow Him.
6. If Jesus really does know the pain of human loss and suffering, then He can comfort and encourage me in the turbulence that is inevitable in a world corrupted by sin.
7. If Jesus really loves me as He says He does, then He always has my best interests at heart. That means I have nothing to lose and everything to gain by committing myself to Him and his purposes for my life.
8. If Jesus really is who He claims to be (and remember, no leader of any other major religion has even pretended to be God), then as my Creator He rightfully deserves my allegiance, obedience, and worship.<sup>8</sup>

**My friends, Jesus of Nazareth is in fact and in truth God's promised Messiah.**

*He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn over all creation.  
For everything was created by him,  
in heaven and on earth,  
the visible and the invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions  
or rulers or authorities—  
all things have been created through him and for him.  
He is before all things,  
and by him all things hold together.  
He is also the head of the body, the church;  
he is the beginning,  
the firstborn from the dead,  
so that he might come to have  
first place in everything.  
For God was pleased to have  
all his fullness dwell in him,  
and through him to reconcile  
everything to himself,  
whether things on earth or things in heaven,  
by making peace  
through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:15-20).*

**My friend, Jesus has earned the right to be your Master, Lord, and King.**

**Will you follow Him?**

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<sup>8</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 266-267.