

# CHAPTER NINE

# THE TRUE KING

*“This is my Father's world:  
O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,  
God is the Ruler yet.”*

*-Maltie B. Babcock, “This is my Father’s World”*

If you could travel back in time and ask the people of Jesus’ day: “Who is the Son of God?” there could be only one politically acceptable answer: *Caesar*. During the century leading up to Jesus’ birth, Julius Caesar had emerged as a brilliant military leader. Drunk on his power, he elevated himself to divine status, literally declaring himself to be God on earth. So when his adopted son Octavian succeeded the throne, Octavian became the Son of God. It was then that Octavian coined the title “Caesar Augustus,” meaning “majestic” or “worthy of honor.” This, of course, was the emperor who ruled Rome during Jesus’ earthly ministry, and shows how quickly the emperor cult spread throughout the empire. One inscription even reads: “Good news! We have an emperor! Justice, Peace, Security, and Prosperity are ours forever! The Son of God has become King of the World.” Rome therefore lived and died under the belief that true human flourishing would take place through a return to the golden age of the Caesars.

First-century Jews balked at this. For the Jewish nation, true human flourishing would take place in the future, when God would finally bring an end to the tyranny of foreign (Roman) rule. These conflicting expectations formed what one writer calls “the making of a first-century storm,” storm fronts that visibly collide upon Jesus’ “triumphant entry” into Jerusalem:

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (John 12:12-13)

Once again, Passover was near. Jerusalem was crawling with visitors, many of whom were well aware of Jesus’ controversial reputation. But at least one faction recognized Jesus as a Messiah—though they clearly understood this role in purely political terms. Roughly 160 years before the birth of Jesus, a man named Judas Maccabeus led a rebellion against Israel’s oppressors. When the Jewish rebels entered the fortress of Jerusalem, they waved palm branches to celebrate their victory. Palm leaves were used on coins to symbolize nationalistic hope. By waving palm branches to celebrate Jesus’ arrival, the crowds celebrated him as another political messiah—another revolutionary. Even the cry of “Hosanna”—meaning “save now!”—was a cry for salvation from their immediately earthly oppression.

Palm Sunday therefore stands as a contrast between what we think we need from God, and what God has actually provided for us. Even today, this kind of earthbound hope lives on amidst the crowds that elevate Jesus as the mascot of our latest political cause. But as we watch the scene play out, we discover that Jesus is a different kind of King entirely:

And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. (John 12:14-16)

Ancient Roman leaders would frequently make a grand entrance into the city, the ancient equivalent of a ticker-tape parade. Alexander the Great, for example, had famously entered the city and been escorted to the temple on two separate occasions. Jesus comes not with an entourage, but on the back of a simple donkey. John tells us that the meaning is initially lost on the disciples, though the pieces came together after the resurrection. Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, who predicted that Israel's king would come riding on a donkey's colt. According to Zechariah, this king would "proclaim peace to the nations," and "free the prisoners" of Israel "because of the blood of my covenant" (Zechariah 9:10-11)

Herein lies the key. Jesus is the true king. But he would achieve peace not at the end of a sword, but through the cross. There, the king lays down his life for his subjects, providing the true "blood of the covenant" that would liberate God's people not from political exile, but the deeper threat of sin and death.

Would such a truth rise above the roar of a crowd? Unlikely. Already the city is abuzz with the news of Jesus' most recent miracle:

The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him." (John 12:17-19)

In fact, if you read John 11 and 12 back-to-back, you'll immediately notice the way the story is woven together by Jesus' relationship with Lazarus and his family. Here, the raising of Lazarus becomes the latest event to set the city in uproar, and the Jewish leaders to conspire for Jesus' death. It's the turning point in John's biography of Jesus, an event that brings Jesus' public ministry to a decisive close as he prepares for the fateful "hour" when he would lay down his life. And it's also the event that teaches us that if we want to understand Jesus' true kingship most fully, we won't do so as bystanders at a victory parade, but as fellow mourners at a close friend's funeral.

## THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

Jesus already had a reputation as a healer. But what would happen when sickness hit closer to home? Prior to his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he received news of a dear friend's illness:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (John 11:1-4)

Lazarus was no stranger. He was Jesus' close friend. So, initially, Jesus messages Lazarus' two sisters that their brother would live, and that God would be glorified through it—not unlike what he'd said about the man born blind. Then Jesus does the unthinkable: he waits. Granted, the journey would have brought considerable risk, especially now that he'd outraged the religious authorities so significantly. But that's not the cause of Jesus' delay. Shockingly, Jesus seems to deliberately wait until his friend is already dead:

After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:11-16)

Jesus is glad? On the surface it might seem heartless. But Jesus already has a plan, a plan that would bring both Lazarus and the people's faith to their feet.

By the time he arrives at Lazarus' home, the funeral had already been going on for some time. Jewish custom demanded that the deceased be buried on the day they died. But four days later, the family home remains surrounded by an entourage of mourners.

What does grief look like today? According to one set of scholars, Jesus inhabited a world in which "a case of the flu, a bad cold, or an abscessed tooth could kill." But most of western culture has largely been insulated from the worst effects of death. In his book *Adulthood*, former Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse explores the way that death had once been a larger part of our cultural backdrop:

"Given death's ubiquity, people were more matter-of-fact about it. One Puritan custom was to display the body of a deceased individual in a kitchen for a week as family and neighbors gathered to pay their respects. Another was to give pairs of gloves as invitations to funerals. Ministers would receive these gloves as well, and Andrew Eliot of the famous North Church in Boston kept track of the gloves he received. In his thirty-two years as minister, he collected nearly 3,000 pairs—that's just shy of two pairs per week over his career."

Sasse notes that even children were taught about the reality of death. He cites a children's book containing the maxim: "Tis not likely that you will all live to grow up." Such sentiments seem wholly alien to our sanitized culture of vaccines and safety belts. But the COVID-19 revealed just how quickly the limits of modern medicine can be exhausted.

Of course, sometimes it takes a funeral to be reminded of just how fragile life truly is. Upon Jesus' arrival, he is confronted by Lazarus' grief-stricken sister

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." (John 11:20-22)

Martha greets Jesus with a statement that all of us might find familiar: *If only you'd been here*. Is she angry? Disappointed? Or does her second statement reveal a desperate optimism now that the healer has arrived?

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." (John 11:23-27)

Jesus engages Martha with a solemn promise: her brother will rise again. Martha doesn't doubt this. First-century Jews believed that God would perform a universal resurrection at the end of human history. What they never expected was that God might perform a single resurrection in the *center* of human history. Jesus tells her: "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, Jesus is inviting Martha to take her eyes off of the funeral itself—*Don't look at the mourners*, he seems to be saying. *Don't look at sadness. Don't even look at the tomb. Look at me.*

It's impossible not to think of Jesus' own resurrection, here. Through union with Christ, believers take hold of the promise that they, too, will be raised to new life. Jesus is telling Martha that the resurrection promise is now here. God's glorious future is about to invade the present, proving that life and hope are closer than Martha ever dared dream.

Jesus presses Martha further, asking: "Do you believe this?" Martha's answer is theologically rich, though not wholly committal. "I believe you are the Christ," she admits. *I know you are the King*, she seems to be saying. *But how does this help my brother?* Truth is, sometimes that's all any of us can do: to cling to the simply truth of who Jesus is even when we can't possibly fathom what that means in the midst of our suffering. Martha is about to witness what the healing hands of the king can truly do—but first, Jesus would have a conversation with Lazarus' other sister.

## THE LAST ENEMY

While Martha had come out to meet Jesus, her sister Mary stays in the house until summoned:

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. (John 11:32-35)

Her fall to his feet seem as much an act of exasperation as an act of worship, and her first words to Jesus are identical to those of her sister, as if they'd spent four days repeating the line between themselves: *I wish he'd been here.*

With Martha, Jesus had entered into a theological discussion. But with Mary, Jesus simply offers his presence—and tears. John's Greek vocabulary here describes Jesus as more than merely "moved." He was angry. Why angry? We might conclude that Jesus is frustrated at the disbelief of the mourners, some of whom seem more eager to blame him for his absence. But there may be another reason. Jesus is life itself (John 1:4). Maybe anger is the just response when standing in the presence of death, which is why Jesus' anger flares back up when facing Lazarus' tomb.

Modern culture has sought in vain to "domesticate" death—to turn it into something to make peace with. We live in denial of our own mortality, so when we're inevitably confronted by death the most we can do is mutter vague platitudes like: "At least he's in a better place" or "It was her time to go." And for the right price, you can pay for a "designer" funeral complete with custom caskets and other luxury going-away presents.

Death isn't something we can "make peace" with. The Bible calls death "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26), and we don't make peace with this type of enemy. Anger is the just and right response to the presence of this enemy. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor at Yale, experienced this clash of expectations firsthand after the untimely death of his son. In the aftermath, he was struck again and again by the unhelpful reactions of fellow mourners:

"Someone said to [my wife], 'I hope you're learning to live at peace with Eric's death.' Peace, shalom, salaam. Shalom is the fullness of life in all dimensions. Shalom is dwelling in justice and delight with God, with neighbor, with oneself, in nature. Death is shalom's mortal enemy. Death is demonic. We cannot live at peace with death."

No one can live at peace with death, not until this enemy has been finally robbed of its victory and sting. And that's precisely what the true King has come to do. Far from a messiah solely interested in delivering his people from political tyrants, Jesus has come to lead his people on a new exodus out of the land of death and into the very Kingdom of God:

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. (John 11:38-41)

Ancient Jews didn't actually bury their dead. Instead, they would wrap the deceased in burial cloths, strips of linen and burial spices, then place the body on a shelf inside an enclosed tomb, often shared with other family members. According to some Jewish teachings, the deceased was not beyond the potential for revival after three days. But Lazarus had been gone now for four days. By now he was surely beyond the reach of a miracle-worker. More practically, four days of decay would result in a sickening odor the moment the tomb was opened.

At Jesus' insistence, the stone is removed. We can imagine the murmurs that ripple through the crowd at this point, as all eyes fall on the solemn figure of Jesus.

And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:41-44)

Earlier, Jesus had declared that "an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). Here, he makes good on that promise, calling Lazarus out of the darkness of the grave and into the light of the King's presence, still wrapped in the cloths he was buried in. And all around we can hear the stunned gasps of former skeptics, their sorrow dissolving into joy just as their doubt turns to belief.

The raising of Lazarus is Jesus' sixth and final miracle prior to his own resurrection, serving as the hinge of John's literary work. It brings the "book of signs" to an exhilarating conclusion, though also escalates Jesus' conflict with the religious authorities to its breaking point. John introduces us to Caiaphas, the chief priest, who plays a role in the decision to finally have Jesus executed. So intense, so focused is their hatred, that they even plan on eliminating Lazarus, bringing Jesus' fledgling movement to its knees once and for all. Little did they realize that this, too, was part of the King's unfolding plan.

## THE KING BECOMES A CORPSE

Imagine that someone you love desperately dies. If they were brought back to life, how would you react? You'd probably throw a party for the person responsible. And that's just what happens shortly before the Passover:

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:1-3)

Nard was a fragrant oil derived from a plant native to India. Its rarity and quantity testify that this was a kingly gift indeed, a thank-you gift of the highest caliber. Mary's gesture is tender, and saturated with unvarnished humility. But instead of seeing Mary's gratitude, Judas only sees waste:

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:4-8)

In Jewish custom, hospitality would commonly be shown by anointing a guest's head with oil, not their feet. In fact, the only time when you might anoint a person's feet was after they died and you were preparing them for burial. Mary knew this all too well, and as a close family member she may have performed the same ritual on her brother not long before.

It's not clear that Mary recognized the significance of what she was doing. Jesus interprets her act as symbolically preparing his own body for death. And that's where we find the truest expression of Jesus' kingship. When he enters the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, he's pointing to the day when the "blood of the covenant" would result in peace, freedom, and justice—and the blood that would be shed would be his own. The true King has come to set his subjects free, but in order to do that the King must become a corpse. Before Jesus can truly be the "resurrection and the life," he must become death. He must go to the cross. In doing so, he shatters the stranglehold of death that has plagued creation from the very beginning. If you want to honor Jesus as your King, you must first understand him as a corpse—the payment paid for your release from a land of sin, self-rule, and death itself.

Today, it's easy to forget Jesus' claim to Kingship. Everywhere we look we see death and disorder grabbing the biggest headlines. How do we respond to these notifications of continual decay? By reminding ourselves that we are under the rule of the Resurrection and the Life. There can be no tragedy that Jesus' resurrection and future kingdom cannot transform into brightness and hope. Some years ago, I visited a resident of a nursing home. On her bedside table sat two items. One was a stack of absorbent pads, meant to protect the mattress from the indignities of an aging and failing body. The other was a bouquet of flowers, resplendent in color and variety. This is an image of the kingdom of God in its "already/not-yet" form. There's a thousand bitter reminders of the way our world is groaning for completion. Yet in the unfolding of every flower, and in the golden rays of the summer sun, we're reminded that death won't always have the last word, that beauty and hope cast a brighter light than death can cast a shadow.