

Jesus: Liberator and King

Advance in Faith 1 — Unit 2

Week 4 — The king arrives at his capital



Introduction

The final week of Jesus' life is so definitive that the gospel writers devote one third of their space to these crucial events. For months, Jesus has been planning this trip to Jerusalem. (See Luke 9:31, 51.) He plans to arrive at Passover, when crowds of people swell into the city. What will happen when he arrives? Will the people accept him as the long-awaited son of David who will restore them as God's kingdom? Or will the rulers of Jerusalem reject him as a threat to their power? He anticipates a confrontation—a showdown with the powers that claim to run his capital city.

In Galilee, people had gathered in their hundreds to hear Jesus, sometimes even in their thousands. But Jerusalem had a different dynamic. The temple authorities in Jerusalem were much more guarded. The high priest was the most powerful person in Jewish society, and Rome knew it. They actually appointed the high priest in this period, so they could control him or replace him if he did not keep the people under control. So the temple leaders were very edgy about anyone who could be perceived as a threat to Rome.

They feared a popular uprising as had happened in the days of Judas Maccabeus. If the people proclaimed a son of David as their king, it would be an act of rebellion against Caesar. The temple rulers knew that the Romans would crush the rebellion without mercy, and they themselves would be replaced, probably executed for failing to keep the people under control.

Passover time was the most difficult. The Feasts of Passover celebrated the moment when God liberated Israel from Pharaoh's abusive rule, and formed them into a nation—a kingdom under God's rule instead of human rule. The Passover memories fuelled the hope of liberation, of once more being set free. Jewish people travelled from all over for Passover—not just Palestine, but from Europe and from Egypt if they could. There was an air of celebration and expectation. It was the time when the crowds were the most unpredictable.

Listen to the buzz on the streets of Jerusalem: Would Jesus come for Passover? Would he deliver them from Rome, just as Moses had delivered them from Egypt? He was a descendant of David: could he be the Davidic king? He keeps talking about the kingdom. Could he be the one God will send to liberate us?

Riding into Jerusalem as king (Luke 19:28-40)

It's Monday. News breaks out: "He's coming across the Kidron Valley, down from the Mount of Olives to the east." Crowds rush to line the road, to hail him as their king. They cry, "Hosanna!" throwing their coats and branches beneath his feet.

The pilgrims would meet others on the same pilgrimage, to meet God in the temple. They greeted each other with the words of **Psa 118:26**:

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.”

Long ago, these words were used by the crowds to greet their king.¹ It had been centuries since they had a king, but the hope remained that God would restore the Davidic kingship, that the God who delivered them from Egypt would come and deliver them from their endless oppression. **Luke 19:38** describes how the pilgrims see Jesus as this king, the one who comes in God’s name to save them, the one who will finally bring heaven’s peace to Israel.

It is a regal procession, but an odd one. The king is not arrayed in glorious garments, or mounted on a magnificent steed emblematic of a great warrior king. Instead, he rides a humble donkey, and a borrowed one at that! But the crowd doesn’t mind. Some of them recall the words of Zechariah the prophet:

Zech 9⁹ Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the **war horse** from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall speak peace to the nations;
his rule shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

He is not coming to attack Rome, but to bring peace to Israel! How?

Announcing judgement on Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44)

When the great king reaches Jerusalem, what does he do?

He bursts into tears (Luke 19:41)!

This is tragic! He is not going to fight the Romans. In fact, he has constantly warned the people not to fight their enemies. When he instructed Israel to love their enemies, at least part of what meant was that they were not to kill them! Despite Jesus’ attempts to lead Israel peacefully, there are many who long for liberation by a sword, as in the days of Joshua and David of old.

Jesus has repeatedly warned Israel that rebellion against Rome would end badly for them. God’s reign cannot be established by violence. War cannot produce peace.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 715.

Jesus has tried to lead Israel in peace, but they would not have it. He will not *force* them to follow him (v.42). His tears flow because the king sees they are determined to take the path of violence, and he sees how devastated they will be. Rome will besiege Jerusalem (v.43). They will tear down his city brick by brick. They will slaughter even the children (v.44).

Why will this happen? Because:

- a) they refused to follow Jesus in the way of **peace** (v.42),
- b) they did not recognise that God was **visiting** them in Jesus, so they refused to follow his way (v.44).

After the Davidic kingship had been cut off by Babylon, Isaiah promised that God would visit them to deliver them (compare Isaiah 40). He had come in the person of Jesus, but they rejected the one who would save them.

There can be only one outcome when God's people reject his leading and pleading. God must correct his people with judgement. In the past, God sent *Assyria* in judgement against Israel because of their rebellion (2 Kg 17:6-7). He sent *Babylon* in judgement against Jerusalem because of their disobedience (2 Chron 36:19-21). He will now send *Rome* in judgement of the city that once again rejected God's rule.

Jesus stakes his credibility as a prophet on his declaration that Rome will do as Babylon had done: destroy Jerusalem. Forty years later, in AD 70, it happened exactly as Jesus had said.

Cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12-13)

When Jesus returns next morning, Mark describes a strange event:

Mark 11 ¹³ And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. ¹⁴ And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

How odd! It is **not the season for figs**, yet Jesus curses the tree. Why? We'll come back to this question.

Overturing the temple (Luke 19:45-48)

So Jesus enters the temple, to provoke a confrontation with the temple leaders. He interrupts the things that normally happen there. There is a temple tax that every Jew is expected to pay. The tax must be paid with a particular coin, so the Jews who have travelled from other places for Passover need to change their currency. Jesus overturns the tables of the money traders. There are also animals available for

sacrifice. Jesus creates a makeshift whip and drives the sacrifice animals out of the temple!

This is not a “cleansing” of the temple: he’s not tidying things up: he’s overturning the place. He is interrupting the normal temple business. It is an act of confrontation against the temple rulers.

Jesus is acting out a prophetic warning against the temple rulers. If they refuse to recognise YHWH’s visitation to Jerusalem in him, if they refuse to follow him in the way of peace, if they continue to reject the one God has given them to restore Israel, if they continue to play their two-faced game with their Roman rulers, eventually Rome will get sick of their façade and invade the city and overturn the temple for good! It will be much more than the symbolic act Jesus has just given them: it will be utter devastation, war against Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple.

Jesus calls the temple leaders for the fakes they are. They pretend to cuddle up to the Roman authorities, but everyone knows that the temple is the one place that the Gentiles cannot enter, and so it is the place where rebellious plots against Rome are discussed in secret. That’s not what the temple was supposed to be. It’s supposed to be a house where God’s people pray for the Gentiles, where they reflect the heavenly ruler in the way Jesus called them to do in the Sermon on the Mount.

Instead, Jesus accuses them of being “a den of robbers” (v.46). The Greek word was not used of swindlers, but of armed bandits, brigands, revolutionaries. John 18:40 uses it of Barabbas, a terrorist. Matt 27:38 uses it of two “robbers” crucified with Jesus—revolutionaries Rome wanted dead. Why does Jesus condemn the temple? Instead of being a place to pray for the nations, it is a hangout for anti-Roman revolutionaries.²

Jeremiah had used the same words before Babylon overran Jerusalem and destroyed the temple 600 years earlier. Jeremiah 7 warned that God would not continue to live among them in the temple when their lives were characterised by violence, injustice, and idolatry:

Jer 7 ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a **den of robbers** in your eyes?

Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD. ...

¹⁵ And **I will cast you out** of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Jesus believes the Romans will destroy this “den of robbers”, just as the Babylonians had done in Jeremiah’s day.

² Josephus uses “den of robbers” in *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.415f.; 15.345–8; compare *Wars of the Jews* 1.304–11.

At times, the prophets **enacted prophecy**. Jeremiah smashed a bowl (Jer 19). Ezekiel laid siege to a model of Jerusalem (Eze 4). Isaiah symbolized enslavement by walking naked and barefoot (Isa 20). Jesus is not *cleaning up* the temple: he is *enacting judgement* against it: acting out what the Romans will do when they overturn Jerusalem!

(But don't forget that Jesus plans to take on what Israel could not do. He will face Rome's judgement on their behalf. That is what he has come to Jerusalem to do. Whether it saves Jerusalem or not depends on how they respond to the salvation he provides.)

The withered fig tree (Mark 11:20-25)

Next morning when they come back to Jerusalem, they see the fig tree Jesus cursed. It's withering. The fig tree was a national symbol for Israel. It's a symbol Jesus has already used (Lk 13:6-9.) The disciples understand the fig tree is also *enacted prophecy* about Jerusalem. The city is a place of showy leaves (the beautiful temple) but lacks the fruit of God's presence among them. What they are about to do to Jesus is the rejection of God's presence!

If the disciples had any doubt about what the withered fig tree meant, hear how Jesus responded:

Mark 11²² And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.
²³ Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain,
 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt
 in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to
 pass, it will be done for him."

This is a lesson in prophetic faith, but why *this* lesson? Why *now*?
 And why a *mountain*?

Think about where they are: walking towards Jerusalem from the east. Approaching Jerusalem, there is only one mountain of significance: Mount Zion, the place of the temple! "This mountain" will be cast down. What Jesus did to the fig tree was enacted prophecy against Jerusalem and the temple. Jesus wept over the unresponsive city. He found their hearts closed. Consequently, their fate was sealed.

So, Jesus explicitly pronounced judgement on Jerusalem:

Luke 21⁵ And while some were speaking of the temple,
 how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he
 said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will
 come when there will not be left here one stone upon
 another that will not be thrown down."

Luke 21²⁰ "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by
 armies, then know that its desolation has come near."

Jesus has come to Jerusalem to deal with evil. He does not engage with the political powers as the perpetrators of evil. He engages with the people of God: salvation and judgement originate from there.

Being the Passover lamb (Luke 22:14-21)

When the day of the Passover meal arrives, Jesus makes secret arrangements because one of his disciples cannot be trusted (vv7-13). He knows he is about to be betrayed, handed over, and killed. He wants to explain the significance of all this to his disciples, but he knows they cannot grasp it yet. So instead of giving them a theology of the atonement, he gives them a meal.

The low table is set with the Passover lamb, herbs, wine, and unleavened bread. They are dressed to leave in haste—recalling Israel’s flight from Egypt.

Jesus explains just how special this meal is. Yes, it looks **back** to the exodus, the time when Israel came out of Egypt and became a nation. But this meal also looks **forward** to the ultimate deliverance he is about to provide from sin and death, the establishment of God’s new nation—his kingdom rule over the whole earth (Lk 22:15-16). Jesus invests the familiar Passover meal with new significance.

He passes the wine, explaining that next time he drinks with them the kingdom will have come (v.17-18). It’s that close!

As he gives them the bread, he explains he is giving them his body (v.19). He is offering his body for their deliverance.

He has been declaring judgement over Jerusalem because she will not repent. Now Jesus explains that **he is taking that judgement** upon himself. He will offer himself, so they can go free. He will be the Passover lamb—the one who dies so that death does not grip God’s people. He will take the judgement in his own body, so they become God’s kingdom!

Taking the cup, he declares it to be “the new covenant in my blood” (v.20). His blood is the gift of his life (compare Lev 17:11, 14). Once again, Jesus is **enacting** in this meal the prophetic reality of what will occur next day.

All that Jesus has been doing and saying—his intentions, his vocation, his hope for Israel and for the world—come into focus in this meal:

... a young Jewish prophet, reclining at table with twelve followers, celebrating a kind of Passover meal, constituting himself and them as the true Israel, the people of the renewed covenant, and doing so in a setting and context which formed a strange but deliberate alternative to the Temple. The symbols of Jesus’ kingdom-announcement, in other words, come together in the upper room.³

³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 437.

Conclusion

Evil must be faced; it cannot be ignored. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the adulation of the crowds. They recognised him as the king who would finally deliver them from evil's oppressive reign and set things right.

But the evil was not just in Rome: it was ingrained in Israel as well: the "house of prayer" is a "den of robbers." Jesus announced judgement on Jerusalem. The temple that should be the presence of the holy God was the presence of evil instead. In word and symbol, Jesus announced the downfall of evil. But he did so knowing that he must take the judgement of God's people on himself. He gathers the twelve for the Passover meal, and announces in symbol that he will offer himself as the lamb—the one who bears the judgement of death, so the people of God go free. The ultimate injustice is death itself—the weapon tyrants use to maintain their power. Evil will kill him, but when death has done its worst, love will overcome evil, and he will celebrate the new kingdom with God's people.

Group Questions:

1. Imagine the disciples at the Passover meal, celebrating the release from slavery in Egypt, the angel of death who "passed over" those who celebrated this meal, and the wonder that they were about to become God's nation. How much would they have understood of what Jesus was saying and doing with them in this meal? (Luke 22:14-21.)
2. Describe what this meal means to you, when we celebrate the Lord's supper. How does Jesus' body and blood overcome evil within us and in our world?

*Take time to share communion with those in your group.
A few people may like to offer prayers of thanksgiving for what Jesus has done, what he has achieved.*

3. How should Christians deal with evil? Is there a place for condemning evil? In what ways should we fight evil? What would it mean for us to "take up our cross"?

Memory Work:

Luke 19:38 (NIV)

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”
“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Take Home Exercise:

Read Luke 19:28-48. If Jesus dealt with evil by condemning it and then bearing that condemnation in his own body on the cross, consider what this means for us:

- Does evil still exist in our world? Why? Hasn't Jesus' love overcome evil yet?
- How should we fight evil? What's appropriate? What's not?
- Why are we called to take up our cross? What does this mean for you?

In preparation for next week, read Mark 13-16.