

March 24, 2024

Zechariah 9:9-10

As you read the Old Testament, you may notice that a common theme is this: Israel gets bullied a lot. Their beginning as a nation is in Egypt- 1400 BC, and they are enslaved and oppressed until God rescues them and leads them to the promised land. When they get to the promised land, they get bullied by different nations, the Edomites and Moabites to the Southeast, the Philistines to the Southwest, Ammonites to the Northwest, and the Arameans to the North, as we saw last week with Naaman. But all those nations were smaller and less dominating than what would come next. Starting in around 700 BC, the Assyrian Empire- not just nation- empire known for brutality and torture from modern day Iraq would bully God's chosen nation, and they completely demolished the northern tribes of Israel so that only Judah was left. About 100 years later, the Babylonian Empire in modern day Iraq under Nebuchadnezzar would come and destroy Jerusalem and take the people into captivity. 70 years later, another Empire, the Persians under Cyrus the Great would come and defeat the Babylonians and they would let the Jews return back to their homes, but still require heavy taxes. And so the returning Jews come back to find their home destroyed and desolate, and they start from scratch, wondering, "If our God is as great and as powerful as he says he is, if he's truly in control of all things, like he says he is, why are we always getting bullied? Why do all these different empires get to be powerful and strong and victorious? When is it our turn? When is our mighty king going to come and establish his powerful empire?" And the prophet Zechariah is sent by God to answer that question: "*Soon.*" But this king is going to be different. He's not going to be like the other kings. In some ways, this king is going to be a king that causes his people to pause and say, "Wait. What? How does that work?" And so what I'd like to do is ponder the two major questions that Zechariah's people would have been wondering when he told them about their coming king: 1. Why a donkey? 2. Why peace?

1. Why a Donkey? Zechariah's book in the Old Testament isn't very well-known by Christians, probably because the first 8 chapters of his book are filled with complex visions and prophetic dreams. But starting in chapter 9, Zechariah is writing poetic sermons for his people from God, and this specific one is a warning to all of the nations that have been bullying Israel, saying that God is going to give justice to those who have been mistreating his people. Then, here in verse 9, Zechariah says, "Rejoice greatly! Shout for joy, Daughter Zion, Daughter Jerusalem." Who is he addressing? That's a poetic way of speaking to God's people- Zion was the mountain on which most of Jerusalem was built- so Zion, Jerusalem, Judah, are all different ways to describe God's people. And they should celebrate! They should rejoice! Given the scene, this is a bizarre command- remember- they are in the process of building their homes and their temple from scratch. Life was hard and discouraging- but they are supposed to rejoice! Why? Because their king is coming. Finally, their king is coming, and he is going to be a righteous king. The kings Israel had, especially right before the exile, were not righteous kings. They taxed way too much, they were corrupt, greedy men who took advantage of the people. But this king would be righteous. A good king who cares for his people and a king who saves. The Kings of Israel weren't strong enough or powerful enough to save them from their enemies, and if they were, they died off and their sons were weak. But this king is not only noble, true, honest, fair, and good. He's

strong. He's powerful. He's mighty. He's valiant. He doesn't lose. No empire can defeat him, no army can crush him. And he's riding on a donkey. *Wait. What?*

If you've ever been to the Kentucky Derby Museum, you may know that a horse can go from 0 to 40 miles per hour in 3 strides. If you have ever been to Summerfest, or any big public gathering, often the police doing crowd control will ride on horses because they are imposing and help the officers see above everyone. If you've ever seen war movies, you know that horses are big, strong, fast, powerful, and fearless when riding into battle and have no problem trampling over enemy soldiers. The horse is known as being a majestic, valiant, powerful, imposing animal. When kings wanted to make themselves look powerful, they rode horses to show that they themselves are powerful, strong, valiant, courageous, and to say, "If you get in my way, you are going to get trampled." But this king is going to be different. Instead, he is going to ride a *donkey*. When he enters his capital city, when he rides into battle, he is going to be riding a donkey. In fact, not just a donkey, colt- a young donkey. When a king rode on a horse, he was brought up several feet. He was above everyone- you would have to look up to him. But when this king rides on a young donkey, he's going to be at the same level as everyone else. He's humble. He's lowly. Another valid translation for that word is "poor." This is the kind of king he's going to be. 550 years later, Jesus sent two of his disciples to find a young donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem, and the crowd knew exactly what Jesus was saying: "I'm that king from Zechariah's prophecy. I am the ultimate hope for God's people. I have come to establish God's kingdom, an empire unlike any other, behold I come to you lowly, riding on a donkey." Everyone knew exactly what Jesus was doing, but I'm not sure anyone understood why. Why a donkey? Why was that so important?

Because donkeys are beasts of burden. They were smaller than horses, slow, ugly, common, but not weak. Donkeys are actually quite strong. They were used for farm labor and carrying the luggage. They are animals of service and work. Not glamorous, but helpful. That's the kind of king Jesus is. He doesn't ride on a horse to trample you, but on a donkey to serve you. And while this Palm Sunday seems like a triumphant ride of victory, Jesus knew that he was riding into battle. And unlike any other king, Jesus' battle wouldn't be against the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, or Romans- like people thought. It would be against death itself- to set his people free from Hell. And he wouldn't win by slaying his enemies, but by being slain by his enemies. He wouldn't win by inflicting punishment, but by being afflicted with the divine punishment that we all deserved. He would conquer not by conquering, but by being conquered. The righteous, perfect, glorious king would be humiliated as a criminal, so that his people could be righteous, perfect, and glorious along with him. The victorious king would win by letting himself lose, and in doing so would destroy Satan, sin, and death forever. Why a donkey? Because Jesus doesn't win by trampling, conquering, dominating, and gaining honor and prestige for himself. He serves, and through his service, he wins.

2. Why peace? In verse 10 we see something remarkable that you might miss the first time you read it. Ephraim is going to be restored. Ephraim wasn't really a thing at the time when Zechariah wrote this- it was a northern tribe, and the northern half of Israel had been destroyed and was no more. God is saying

all of his people are going to enjoy his kingdom, none are being left behind. And when God is talking about this expansive kingdom, this rule he is about to establish, one would expect that this kingdom will grow like any other kingdom. Conquest and war. But in this kingdom, this empire that Jesus is going to establish will not only be established through his service, as opposed to his conquering, but this empire will be one that is peaceful, just, and perfect. It would be one thing for God to say that he is going to bless Ephraim with chariots, and bless the battle horses of Jerusalem and give Israel bows that are accurate and bless the military efforts with success. But the kingdom that Jesus establishes, his empire will actually eradicate the need for weapons. No one will need bows or chariots or battle horses. They are going to be cut off! And the result of this will be an empire that goes beyond the limits of any other. You see, the Persian Empire at the time of Zechariah covered everything between Greece, Egypt, India, and Turkey. It was huge. The Roman Empire centuries later in Jesus' day covered all of Europe, up to England, Spain, France, Germany, down to Egypt and Ethiopia, also Greece, Turkey, and as far as India. And God through Zechariah is saying, "*That's nothing.*" God's kingdom is going to spread not just throughout the Ancient Near East, but throughout the entire world, and it will not only dominate its enemies, but turn its enemies into friends and cause everlasting peace forever. And my friends, this is happening as we speak. Jesus' kingdom that he established by letting himself be murdered is not a visible empire- it's rule isn't confined to a country or visible government. Jesus' kingdom is his rule in the hearts of people- and grows as people come to faith. And it's growing. And when he comes back, it will be finished- in the new heavens and new earth will be a new society, a new culture where peace and justice and perfection and life reign forever.

Therefore, don't settle for a lesser kingdom and a lesser peace. In Zechariah's day, it was likely thought that when the King would come, he would restore Israel back to her former glory and they would have a big, powerful empire like the Babylonians and the Persians. In Jesus' day, most people, including his disciples, thought that Jesus' mission was to defeat the Roman Empire and establish God's earthly kingdom. But the problem was that if that's what Jesus would have done, what would have happened? Sure, they may have had more prosperous, peaceful lives, but they would still have to bury their family members when they died. They would still have to deal with the conflict, betrayal, and strife of relationships. They would always wonder when the next attack was coming to their empire. Jesus came not to establish an earthly kingdom, but to bring people into his Heavenly kingdom where there will be no death, no famine, so sickness, no sin. That's what he wanted them, and us, to put our hopes in. I think this is especially important for us to understand today. Within the next few months, there will be politicians and spiritual leaders telling you that now is the time to make America a "Christian Nation," and that if we just get the right people into office, pass the right bible-based laws, we can have a "Christian" society where peace and justice reign supreme. Do not fall for it. The Kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom or empire or country. Think about this- if there were ever a time to bring a nation "back to God," wouldn't it have been 1st Century Israel in Jesus' day? But Jesus did not kick the Romans out, but instead told his people to submit to the pagan governing authorities. Do not put your hope in a Christian nation, Christian society, Christian laws, or Christian politicians. Sure, vote for who you like, but no nation was or ever will be a "Christian nation." There is only one Kingdom of God, and

it spreads not through laws or conquest, but through the preaching of the good news of Jesus' life and death for you. Do not settle for a lesser peace or a lesser kingdom. Because the real one is coming. Very soon. Amen.