

# A Journey to Jerusalem

The concluding week of Jesus' ministry as "the Human One" (v. 23) brings together all the contrasts and



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evidence pointing to God's ultimate plan for humanity. The Apostle John looks back over all the details and events as he identifies and presents the fullness of God's grace. We witness Jesus' triumphal entry contrasted with the stated enmity of the religious power brokers, Jesus celebrated as deliverer but riding on a lowly donkey, the background of Lazarus' miraculous resurrection against Jesus' parable that his death will be like the planting of a single seed that will produce a beautiful harvest. All of this culminates in the glorious outcome that Jesus' death is life!

Go back to the account of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus the night before his celebrated entrance into Jerusalem (12:1-11). This was when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, about which Judas protested, and Jesus said, "Leave her alone, this perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it."

The writer also points to this event as a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9: "Don't be afraid, Daughter of Zion! Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey colt." We have the contrast of the easy adoration of the crowds with the dark comments of the Pharisees: "See! You've accomplished nothing! Look! The whole world is following him" (v.20)!

Remember this is Passover, the celebration of God's deliverance for his chosen people from slavery in Egypt. Not only is Jerusalem overcrowded with thousands of pilgrims, but the countryside is dotted with temporary camps. In former years there had been two armed uprisings at Passover, so the Romans always moved troops in from other assignments and from the provincial capital Caesarea. Roman Governor Pontius Pilate is there to handle any problems and the Jewish council will appeal to him for Jesus' death at the end of the week. The contrast is dramatic: first the glittering array of Roman soldiers led by Pilate, then the humble figure of a popular

teacher on a donkey. When these two contrasting forces meet, what seems to be chaos and disaster is transformed into God's incomparable promise.

There is another powerful reminder of what this Passion Week represents, as a group of Greeks who came for Passover ask Philip to take them to Jesus. These "Greeks" were most likely Hellenistic Jews from outside the province of Palestine, because Gentiles would not visit Jerusalem during the high holy days. Another clue is found in their approaching "Philip, who was from Bethesda in Galilee," an area populated by numerous Gentile residents and Jews who had lived there for generations and adapted to Gentile culture. The writer seems to be focusing on the idea that Jesus' death and resurrection will impact the entire world because God's love is available to all.

Jesus' response to the Hellenistic Jews was, "The time has come for the Human One to be glorified." Then follows a simple but profound parable: "I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it becomes much fruit" (v. 24).

I have just been walking in the sunshine and have seen numerous green shoots emerging from my flower beds. Spring reminds us that winter and absence of growing plants is certainly not the end of life, but the preparation for a new beginning. It is in the death of Jesus that the seed of eternal life is planted, the evidence of God's power and grace are affirmed, and the promise of life is made real. Jesus describes his approaching death as "the time for the Human One to be glorified" (v. 23). Jesus primarily spoke Aramaic in public so he described himself as *bar enasha*, which roughly translates "a human" or "a human such as I." Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, is identifying himself with us as he approaches the cross on our behalf.

Jesus goes on to repeat an idea recorded in all four gospels: "Those who love their lives will lose them, and those who hate their lives in this world will keep them forever" (v. 25). This is a common literary form in Jewish writings in which a significant idea is repeated in contrast. "Hate" means "to reject or take from the top of the list," or "choose

## Formations

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Scripture: John 12:12-28

something else." This idea is highlighted in Jesus' words to his disciples recorded in Matthew 16:25-26: "Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forgets his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul" (NASV)?

Jesus never trivialized life within the grace of God as simple or easy. He is about to die and reminds us we must follow him even if it exacts a price of hardship and suffering. BUT ... witness Jesus' confession: "Now I am deeply troubled. Should I ask God to excuse me from the cross? Absolutely not! This is God's timing and purpose. Loving Father, I glorify your name" (vv. 27-28 paraphrase)! This is the Jesus who is one with us speaking, the little boy from Nazareth, the country rabbi who drew massive crowds and cared about the nobodies, the embodiment of God's grace who offered himself in agonizing crucifixion. He knows fear, despair and pain. Yet, he who is also one with God declares, "I will accept this cross to display the glory of God to all!"

To understand that God loves you and is with you is the key to the Christian life. The four gospels not only teach us the great truths of God, but the strength and joy we can discover in serving God. We watch Jesus struggle and we realize God really is with us. We listen to Jesus pray as he comes closer to the cross and we know that God hears and answers our prayers.

In this season called Lent, as we near the cross and the victory of Easter, we need to listen for the voice of God as we read the Bible, as we witness the empty values and words of the world, as we examine our spiritual life. We can learn from the words and examples of fellow travelers on the road of discipleship. We can heal and grow as we examine our life and values. We, too, are on a journey, not to Jerusalem, but to the blessings of God because Jesus has gone before us to show us the way.

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*Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*