

A WORTHY GOAL

SERIES: MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM: WHY ARE WE HERE?

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Our theme in this series has been God's heart for the world as it is revealed in the Scriptures and what we can learn from that. We began in Genesis 12 where God promised Abraham that through his seed he would bless all the peoples of the world. We saw that promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We went on to examine the wonderful story of the gospel of Jesus. He is the One through whom God has brought forgiveness and salvation to the whole world. God has reached into the struggles and sinfulness of humanity and announced the way out of the mess: the Savior has paid the penalty for our sin, broken the power of sin, and offered us new life.

Over several messages we then examined a number of different passages in the New Testament that call us to go out into our world and share the good news of Jesus Christ. In the last message we summarized all that by talking about how to get connected at this church in order to be growing in our faith, to be part of this community of worshiping believers, and to be prepared to go out and serve in our community and abroad as we seek to lift up the name of Christ.

Now in this message we're going to celebrate by fast-forwarding to the end of the story that God is leading us toward. We'll first look at the account of Palm Sunday, which foreshadows that great day that we are going to focus on. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was the opening of what we often call Passion Week, the week leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection, that pivotal moment in history. Let's briefly look at Luke 19:29-44:

“When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” you shall say, “The Lord has need of it.”’ So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ They said, ‘The Lord has need of it.’ They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road. As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, shouting:

‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord;

Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.’ But Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!’

When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.’”

This is a very interesting scene. As Jesus headed into the city seated on the donkey colt, a crowd began to gather, laying palm branches and coats down on the road before him. Praises rang out from them. We don't know how large this crowd was and who it was made up of, but the core group would have been close followers of Jesus who had been with him for some time now. They had come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the one who was fulfilling the promises that God had made to this nation. They began to offer praise and worship and honor to him.

Mixed into the crowd were also some Pharisees, who were upset about the way these people were lauding Jesus as their new King and the Messiah, because he had become their archenemy, the antithesis of what they stood for, the one who threatened the status quo and their positions.

Perhaps there were others in the crowd who were more tangential. Probably some just came to see what was going

on. Perhaps they participated in the cries of “Hosanna!” (Matthew 21:9; Mark 11:9; John 12:13.) A few days later they might have been part of the crowd that yelled “Crucify him!” (Matthew 27:22-23; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:21-23; John 19:15.)

Jesus himself, instead of being excited as the crowd was, wept when he drew close to Jerusalem. His heart was broken, because he understood that the Jews, by failing to comprehend what God was doing in their midst, were setting themselves up for a horrible fate. He had offered them peace, but they would not and could not see it. So he predicted that a calamity would befall them. Judgment would come on their city and their land, and not even one stone would be left upon another. Jesus was predicting the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, not many years later. That would be the end of the Jewish nation as they knew it for many centuries. What broke Jesus’ heart was the reason for this calamity, in verse 44: “Because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.” In other words, they missed the point of his being there. They did not comprehend what God was doing in their midst. They did not see Jesus for who he was. And by neglecting God’s Messiah, they brought judgment upon themselves.

Now, Jesus’ “triumphal entry” on this occasion was not an end in itself. It foreshadowed the day that is still to come when he will be recognized as the King of kings and Lord of lords who will sit upon God’s throne and be worshiped by the multitudes.

The One who is worthy

Let’s look at that great and glorious day in Revelation 5:1-10:

I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it. Then I began to weep greatly because no one was found worthy to open the book or to look into it; and one of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals.” And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. And He came and took the book out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne. When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

The seven seals of this mysterious book as they are opened in the following chapters turn out to predict great events of God’s judgment as his end-times plan is played out. It involves war, plague, famine, and martyrdom. But eventually it leads up to the revelation of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Notice the description of the one who is worthy to open the book and proclaim these events that lead finally to his exaltation: First of all, he is called the Lion of Judah, the Root of David. He is the fulfillment of the promise that the Messiah would come out of David’s lineage and would rule an eternal kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

He is described as the one who has overcome. There was a huge block to the day when Christ would be King of kings and Lord of lords and God would be worshiped throughout the world. That block was sin and the death that flowed out of sin. But Christ has overcome them.

He is described as the Lamb who was slain. The Lion of Judah is one and the same as the Lamb. The conquering King is one and the same as the one who offered himself as the sacrifice for us all.

He is worshiped and he receives the prayers of the saints. Why is he worshiped as the worthy one? Because as he

was slain, he purchased for God a people. The language of these verses comes right out of the Old-Testament book of Daniel. Look at Daniel 7:13-14:

“I kept looking in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
one like a Son of Man was coming,
and He came up to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
glory and a kingdom,
that all the peoples, nations and men of every language
might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
which will not pass away;
and His kingdom is one
which will not be destroyed.”

Verse 18 of the same chapter says this:

“But the saints of the Highest One will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, for all ages to come.”

We draw a couple of things from these verses. First, the title “son of man,” which is applied to the one who will be the ruler of the eternal kingdom of God and will have dominion over all things, is fulfilled in Christ. Jesus took the name “son of man,” and his followers also applied this name to him, in fulfillment of this promise in Daniel. Second, this one who will sit on God’s throne forever is building a kingdom, and people from every nation and language will come to be part of his kingdom, and they themselves will receive that kingdom and rule with him.

The people purchased for God

That exact language is used in Revelation 5. So what God is doing is calling out a people for himself who were purchased with the blood of the Lamb, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. This four-fold repetition is designed to give as inclusive a picture of all humanity as possible: every kind of person is included in the people God is calling out for himself. The blessing of all the nations of the world that God promised Abraham, we see completely fulfilled in Jesus, who gives himself as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world.

Notice in verse 10 that he has made his people “a kingdom and priests to our God.” Those he is calling out from all places and all times are being formed in two important functions. First, they are called to be a kingdom. The term “kingdom” implies that they are a united people under one King, the Lord Jesus Christ. God is not building a collection of individuals, but a united community of faithful believers.

Now, as we seek to follow Christ and to live authentically and properly as part of the kingdom that he is making us, there are two things that we will always have to fight against. The first thing we have to fight against, particularly if we are westerners, and even more if we are Americans, is the radical individualism of our society. So much of our upbringing and teaching have to do with this radical individualism. Freedom has come to mean my individual rights, being what I want to be and doing what I want to do. We have in a sense deified the idea of the individual in our culture. But the idea of the kingdom of God implies a unity of purpose around our King, which means that my individualism is subservient to the needs of the kingdom. I cannot live out my faith authentically if my motivation is what’s in it for me. I have to see myself as part of the kingdom. You and I will always have to stand against the radical individualism that is so deep in our souls, and see ourselves as part of a community of faith striving together, encourage one another and nurture one another, live out kingdom values, and honor and serve our King, Jesus.

The second thing we have to fight is the tendency to nationalize faith. That has happened throughout history. One of the major problems the Jews had as a nation is that they nationalized their faith; instead of being a light to the nations and extending the kingdom of God to all peoples, they hoarded it within their own nation. In the same way

our sense of nationalism can be an impediment to being true kingdom people. We have to understand that being a part of God's kingdom is something radically different. The language of the New Testament is consistent on this point. The apostle Paul said, "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). He himself was a Jew and a Roman citizen, and he used his Roman citizenship when it was helpful to him in his mission. But he saw himself first and foremost as a citizen of God's kingdom. Peter referred to us as "aliens and strangers" (1 Peter 2:11), because being part of the kingdom of God means that our loyalty is first and foremost to King Jesus, not to any earthly kingdom. I know how difficult this is for us in the midst of the current world situation. But we have more in common with a believer in Iraq than we have with an unbeliever in America. The calling to be citizens of the kingdom of God is a higher commitment. We have a higher loyalty to the leading of King Jesus, his work and his kingdom and his values and his people. If we are going to be men and women who truly take the gospel of Jesus to the nations, we have to draw our identity and our loyalty and our citizenship first and foremost from being his subjects.

The second thing verse 10 tells us about the people whom God is calling out for himself is that he is making them to be his priests. The priestly function was one of worship, being the one who would bring the sacrifices as the representative of the people to God and as a conduit of God's grace back to the people. The priest would draw the people's attention to the greatness of God, to their need of his grace. We are all priests, and in this we are all on equal footing. We talk theologically about the priesthood of all believers. That simply means that you and I as people of God are called to be worshipers of God and to bring others into worship of God, to be those who are representatives of God and ministers for God to people, and to lead people to God in worship.

What then are we to do? Notice what happens when the worthy One is revealed. Revelation 5:11-14:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying,

"To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever."

And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

The worship of the worthy One

The scene here is of a kingdom of people who have recognized the great and glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and they bow before him in worship. Throughout the book of Revelation there are scenarios where the curtain has been drawn back for us to peer into the realm of the eternal kingdom of God, and every time that happens there are people worshiping him, adoring him, blessing him, praising him. It is the call of the people of God to be a worshiping community. We will impoverish ourselves and our activities by the measure with which we forget to worship God. While we have emphasized in this series passages of Scripture that have called us to action on behalf of our King, we must never forget that we will not become a church that is known for its impact in our community and our world simply because we come up with a better method, or because out of some sense of duty we go out and start doing things. The picture of the kingdom of God, the people called from every nation and tribe and tongue, is one of a worshiping community. Out of absolute love for their Savior, kingdom people are changed into his image. They begin to adopt his attitudes, his values, his perspective, his heart for the world. There is nothing you or I can say or do that will all of a sudden make us great witnesses for Christ. But I would suggest that if we become worshipers of the living Christ, completely humble before him as our King and Lord, and our loyalty is absolutely, first and foremost, to him, we will become different people, and we will make a difference in this world.

John Piper wrote a book about missions called *Let the Nations Be Glad*. He reflects this very thought:

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When the age is over and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will

be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and the goal in missions. It is the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory....But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God and worship precede the offer of God in preaching....When the flame of worship burns with the heat of God's true worth, the light of missions will shine to the most remote peoples on earth. And I long for that day to come. Where passion for God is weak, zeal for missions will be weak....Even outsiders feel the disparity between the boldness of our claim upon the nations and the blandness of our engagement with God." (1)

If God is indeed calling us out as a people for himself, we begin our task of following him by becoming worshipping people. We lift up who Jesus is. All of the talking, planning, and organizing we do will fall painfully short if we are not worshipers of God.

When I began traveling regularly in Eastern Europe back in the eighties, I had a dear friend who lived in a small village in the south of Poland. Whenever I visited him, which was quite often on my journeys, I loved to go to church with him. He went to a Brethren church. The Sunday morning service was very informal, and there was a part of the service when anyone who wanted to could stand up and read a passage of Scripture that had been meaningful to them that week. They took seriously the command to bring Scripture and hymns with them to church, steps long forgotten in most of our traditions. I never became fluent in Polish, but I did teach myself basic things like the books of the Bible and numbers. So when someone stood up to read a passage of Scripture, I could read it in my English Bible. I also taught myself some basic Polish Christian words like grace, love, God, Jesus, and so on. So when they were singing hymns I could look in the hymn book, and if it was a song that I was familiar with, I would sing along in English, but if not I could look into the text and see those rich words, and my heart could resonate with that and enjoy that. Those were wonderful Sundays. I got a little foretaste of what it will be like when we will be before the throne of God with people from every language and nation and tongue and tribe, worshipping the Lord, the King of kings.

This is what has to define who we are. We must be a worshipping community in love with Christ, honoring and exalting him, joining together with people from all over the world to lift up the name of Christ, enlarge his kingdom, and allow others to enter into the wonderful experience of knowing and worshipping the living God.

Notes

1. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, © 1993, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. Pp 12-13.

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