

Jesus To Jerusalem

April 7, 2019

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For the next three weeks we are going to take a break from our series in Genesis and focus our attention on the Easter season. Along with Christmas, it's one of the most important celebrations on the Christian calendar. Every year it reminds us, as humans, of our most profound need, and of God's plan for providing for that need. This morning I want to look at a couple of Scriptures in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that describe Jesus' own mindset as he approached Jerusalem, for what he knew would be his own brutal execution. So without further ado, let's look at a few passages in Matthew and Luke, starting with Matthew.

Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, 20:17-19

In Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, which is more than a question about public perception. It is a question which, when answered, explains why people think Jesus has come. In other words, it's not just identity—it's destiny. Peter then famously declares, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16)."* Jesus affirms Peter's God-given revelation and predicts the victory of the church over the Hell itself.

Immediately after this pivotal moment when Jesus' identity has been revealed, Jesus explains how that identity translates into destiny and in Matthew 16:21, he says, *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."* The breakdown between identity and destiny immediately becomes visible. The next verse says, *"Peter took him aside and began*

to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you (Matthew 16:22)."

Matthew 17:22-23 follows that same thread. It says, *"22When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. 23They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief."* And finally, Matthew 20:17-19 says, *"17Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 18" We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death 19and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"*

Although Matthew 16:23 says that the disciples were filled with grief upon hearing that Jesus would be killed and raised again, they clearly did not understand Jesus' destiny, because in the very next passage after Jesus' third prediction of this death, the disciples get into an argument over who would get to sit where in the kingdom of God. To say it a little more clearly: the disciples did not understand the problem Jesus came to fix. And we'll return to that after we look at Luke's description of the same topic.

Luke

Luke's description of Jesus' determined journey to Jerusalem is different than Matthew's, and for that matter Mark's or John's as well. Luke 9:51-53 says, *"51As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem."*

Part of what's interesting about this passage is that it appears so early in the book of Luke. In fact, we're just barely over 40% of the way through Luke's Gospel when this appears. And after this passage, when we expect Jesus to head straight to Jerusalem, we find him not only in Samaria and Jericho, which were the shorter and longer ways to get to Jerusalem, respectively, we find him in Bethany, which is close to Jerusalem, but then after that between Samaria and Galilee, an area farther from Jerusalem.

In other words, Luke's description of Jesus' resolute march toward Jerusalem is not a description of his movements from point a to point b, but a statement about Jesus' ultimate goal and ultimate destiny, which was the cross in Jerusalem. That is borne out by the numerous other times Luke identifies Jerusalem as the place where Jesus would ultimately fulfill the work God sent him to do. Luke 13:22 says, *"Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem."* Luke 17:11 says, *"Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee."* Luke 18:31 says, *"Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled."* Luke 19:28 says, *"After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem."* Jerusalem was the place of Jesus' final and greatest work and he knew it and he embraced it.

Luke focuses less on Jesus' identity and more directly on his destiny. Of course, both of these accounts are true to life. Matthew and Luke simply highlight different aspects of the same series of historical events. So at this point it's worth pausing and asking ourselves the question, why did Matthew and Luke go to such lengths to highlight Jesus' journey to Jerusalem? And why, even before that, why was Jesus so intent on going to Jerusalem? Why did it so shape his thinking and ministry? And why was Jesus the only one who seemed to understand why the cross was central to his ministry?

What's the Problem

So what is humanity's core problem? It depends on who you ask. There is, for instance, a ten million pound prize currently available to anyone who comes up with a solution to one of the six core human problems identified by the charity group Nesta. The six core issues are water (97% of surface water is salty and thus undrinkable), the shortage food for a growing population, flight without fossil fuels, paralysis and the mechanical bodysuits or biochips that can alleviate its difficulties, dementia and its cure and care, and the cure for bacterial infections that are increasingly immune to current antibiotics. Solve one of those problems and you could be ten million pounds richer (that's a little over 13 million in real money).

The prize is actually called the Longitude prize because about 300 years earlier, in 1714, the British Government offered 20,000 pounds to anyone who could figure out longitude, which would make sailing much safer and allow for greater commerce and exploration. In other words, humans will never agree about what is the core human problem to be solved—we just agree that things are not the way they should be.

The reason the cross was so important to Jesus is because he understood that it was the only solution to the core human problem of sin. The reason the idea of Jesus dying on the cross was so offensive, even to Jesus' disciples, was because they did not believe that humanity's central, defining problem was sin. You can't agree with someone on a solution until you share an understanding of the nature of the problem you're trying to solve. Never is that clearer than in the case of the Jesus and his determined journey to the cross.

So how is it that Jesus thought sin was the core defining human problem? The short answer is because that's how the Bible answers the question. The first and maybe most comprehensive description of that is in the Garden of Eden, when

the world was as we all think it should be—a place of God’s presence, place of plenty, and a place of peace. In other words, Adam and Eve enjoyed intimacy with God and with each other, and they had meaningful, creative work that allowed them to exercise the authority God had delegated to them. Genesis 3:6-7 describes the great unraveling. *“6When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”* Adam and Eve, who had once enjoyed such sweet innocence, now felt the suffocating weight of shame.

The story goes on in Genesis 3:8-10. *“8Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ 10He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’”* Now the personal shame Adam and Eve felt put a huge barrier between them and God, and so was lost the beautiful intimacy they enjoyed with their creator.

The story continues in Genesis 3:16-19 *“16To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’ 17To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ ‘Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.’”* And there comes to an end man’s complementary relationship with the earth God created for him. By the end of Genesis 3, man has experienced

physical, spiritual, relational, and environmental death.

If those problems are the result of sin, then the solution to those problems is the removal of sin. If those problems were created because of man’s selfishness, then those problems can only be healed by his submission to God’s sovereign power. That’s why Jesus didn’t come to overthrow the Romans, because the Romans weren’t the problem. That’s why Jesus didn’t come to start a non-profit organization, because the problems they solve are only the fruit of the problem that cause them—human sin and selfishness. That’s why Jesus didn’t come to start schools and educational institutions, because educated people are just as wicked as uneducated people. That’s why Jesus didn’t come to solve environmental problems, because the problem with our physical world is just one more symptom of the core problem, which is sin.

Now, it’s good that we try to solve these problems. It’s good that we try to alleviate suffering and provide for those who need it and educate those who don’t have it—but those are not the core human problem—sin is the core human problem. And while humans are creative and intelligent and can make progress on a whole host of issues, the only one who could solve the core human problem of sin was Jesus, and the only way he could solve that problem was by going to Jerusalem and dying on the cross in order to pay the price for our sin. Jesus certainly healed the sick and fed the hungry and cast out demons, but he did not let those things distract him from his ultimate destiny of canceling the power of sin. You could say it this way: if Jesus wasn’t victorious over sin, then the most he did was to marginally improve the lives of a very few people over a very short period of time. And in that case, we could all find better ways to spend our time than coming here.

Conclusions

Let me offer a couple of conclusions and then we’ll be done. One, as we approach Good Friday and Easter Sunday, don’t lose sight of the core message: Jesus came to forgive our sins. To be sure, the effects of that forgiveness touch on every part of life. Through the work of Christ, we see the beginning of the healing of all that was lost in the Garden—our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, our relationship with the world around us. But ultimately, you can’t truly fix those problems until you fix the problem, which is sin.

Two, as we consider the forgiveness Jesus came to provide, let’s also consider the areas in our own lives where we need that forgiveness to bring change. Maybe we need that forgiveness to heal our broken relationship with God because we’ve never acknowledged our own sin or accepted God’s gracious offer of forgiveness. Maybe we need his forgiveness to restore relationships that have been broken. Maybe we need his forgiveness to heal deep-seated shame. Whatever it is, let’s consider what we need the work of Christ to do as it penetrates to every part of our lives.

Let me say this and I’ll close: Jesus came to forgive our sins, and by so doing, began to heal all of the ways our world demeans, degrades, and destroys human beings. The Good News of Jesus is not that we can keep a whole list of commands, but that we can be forgiven when we don’t and through the work of the Spirit in our lives, we can obey God’s commands, which lead to wholeness, health, life, joy, and peace.

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