

Lesson 14

Last week when we ended we were discussing verse 8 of Zechariah chapter 9. Let's begin today by reading that verse again.

8 And I will encamp about mine house because of the army, because of him that passeth by, and because of him that returneth: and no oppressor shall pass through them any more: for now have I seen with mine eyes.

As we said last week, that verse is describing God's protection of Jerusalem when Alexander the Great swept through the region conquering cities such as Damascus, Tyre, and Gaza, and then returned through the area from Egypt. Those extremely detailed prophecies of Alexander's conquest of Persia and his battle plan were written 200 years before they occurred.

We also read a section from Josephus last week describing *how* God protected Jerusalem from Alexander. According to Josephus, the High Priest had a dream telling him to open the gates and to meet Alexander wearing his priestly headdress. Alexander had also had a dream telling him to look for someone wearing that priestly headdress. Josephus, of course, is not inspired, but his historical description fits very well with what we see here in verse 8. And one thing we know for certain is that Alexander did not destroy Jerusalem.

Now let's look at the end of verse 8: "*and no oppressor shall pass through them any more: for now have I seen with mine eyes.*"

What does that mean? It can't mean that at no future time after Alexander would an oppressor ever pass through Jerusalem. Why? Because Daniel had already prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of another oppressor, the Romans. We know that from Daniel 9:27 and 12:11, and we know that from Matthew 24:15 where Jesus refers to those prophecies. Another oppressor was definitely coming for Jerusalem.

So what does the end of verse 8 mean? It *could* be a reference to the church, which we know from countless other passages enjoys divine protection. In fact, Daniel told us that the church would be the kingdom that would destroy other kingdoms, and not vice versa. We will learn much about the victorious church when we get to the book of Revelation, but I'm not sure the church is in view here in verse 8.

Perhaps the best explanation is the simplest explanation. We get the simplest explanation by viewing the last half of verse 8 in the immediate context of the first half of verse 8, which is all about Alexander's invasion. That is, this oppressor is the same one who passes by and returns. If that is true, then this statement would mean that *Alexander* would never again come into the land of Judah. This would be his only encounter with the Jews. And so far as we know from secular history, that is the case. In fact, Alexander died about 9 years later at the age of 32 (which means he was only about 23 when he marched on Jerusalem — about the same age that Zechariah was at the beginning of this book!).

By any earthly measure, Alexander certainly earned his title of "great." By the time of his death, Alexander's empire of roughly two million square miles stretched from the Danube to the Nile to the Indus. In modern terms, his empire included Greece, Bulgaria,

much of Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Afghanistan, western Pakistan, and parts of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

You have to try pretty hard not to see the hand of God in the life of Alexander the Great! The Bible is clear about who was behind the successes of Alexander. Alexander was simply fulfilling the role that God had arranged for him hundreds of years before he was born.

“For now I have seen with my eyes.” What does that phrase mean at the end of verse 8? It means that God was once again looking with favor on his people. He was noticing their plight, he was judging their enemies, and he was sending them a deliverer.

And if they thought that Alexander the Great was their promised true deliver, they were badly mistaken! The next two verses tell us about the true deliverer of the Jews.

We just saw the mighty Alexander the Great marching with his great army, so I suppose the true deliver will come with even more pomp and circumstance, right? Well, let's see.

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

That's a very different picture from how Alexander rode into a city! And it's very different from how many of the Jews of Jesus' day expected their promised Messiah to enter their city. That difference proved a stumbling block for many of the Jews when Jesus arrived — but they should have known what to expect. Zechariah had told them 500 years earlier.

Verse 9 is a beautiful verse (certainly one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible), and it is a verse that we know with **absolute certainty** is a prophecy about Christ. How do we know that? Because of Matthew 21.

***Matthew 21:1-9** — And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, 2 Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. 3 And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. 4 All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, 5 Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. 6 And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, 7 And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. 8 And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. 9 And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.*

That event in Matthew 21 is precisely what is being prophesied here in Zechariah 9:9. After telling the people about what would happen when Alexander the Great came, God tells them what would happen when the *Messiah* came — an event that occurred about 300 years after the death of Alexander.

Zechariah calls upon “the daughter of Zion” to “rejoice greatly.” The daughter of a place is the population of that place personified as a female. Why should the population of the city experience this outburst of joy? Because of the shocking announcement that follows: “Thy King cometh unto thee.”

King? What king? The last Jewish king was long dead. Zerubbabel was from the royal line, but he was no king. The king of the Jews at this time was the foreign Persian king, Darius!

And notice what this great King would do — he would *come unto* the people, unlike Alexander the Great who *bypassed* Jerusalem. And that was not the only difference between Alexander and the true King who was coming. They had totally different characters.

What do we learn about the character of Jesus from verse 9? Zechariah describes the coming Messiah in four ways.

First, he is “just.” He would be no respecter of persons. This word can also be translated as “righteous.” He would be without sin or blame.

1 Peter 2:22 — *Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.*

Second, he will come “having salvation.” He would come to save his people from their oppressors, and he would free them from their captivity. He would seek and save the lost.

Titus 2:11 — *For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.*

Third, he is “lowly.” He would be humble. He would be meek and lowly in heart.

Matthew 11:29 — *Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

Fourth, he would come into Jerusalem “riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.” What does that tell us about Jesus?

From the time of Solomon the donkey was considered a lowly animal and a symbol of peace. So this type of entrance would stress the meekness of Christ and would also show that Christ was the promised prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6).

Donkeys have always had a bit of a bad reputation, but this particular donkey received a great honor. This donkey is so famous that it became the subject of a poem called “The Donkey,” by G. K. Chesterton. This poem describes the triumphal entry from the donkey’s perspective!

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.
With monstrous head and sickening cry

And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.
The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.
Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

That donkey experienced quite a transformation, which I suspect is the whole point of that poem.

We need to pause here and deal with a difficulty both in this text in Zechariah and in the New Testament verses that record its fulfillment.

We earlier read Matthew's account:

Matthew 21 — 2 Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: **loose them, and bring them unto me.** . . . 6 And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, 7 And brought the ass, and the colt, **and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon.**

Here is how Mark and Luke describe it.

Mark 11 — 2 Go your way into the village over against you: and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; **loose him, and bring him.** . . . 7 And they brought the colt to Jesus, and cast their garments **on him;** and he sat upon him.

Luke 19 — 30 Go ye into the village over against you; in the which at your entering ye shall find a colt tied, whereon yet never man sat: **loose him, and bring him hither.** . . . 35 And they brought him to Jesus: and they cast their garments **upon the colt,** and they set Jesus thereon.

Here then is the question: how many donkeys did Jesus ask for, and how many did he ride into the city? One or two?

First, let's ask a related question: how many donkeys were prophesied? Here, again, is what verse 9 says:

Zechariah 9:9 — “riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass”

That verse definitely mentions at least two donkeys — the colt and its mother.

But how many would be ridden? “Riding upon an ass, and upon a colt.” The Hebrew text there is ambiguous. It could mean riding on two donkeys (an ass *and* a colt), or it could mean riding on only one donkey (an ass *that is* a colt).

Most commentaries favor the latter view and say that verse 9 is an example of Hebrew parallelism, and I agree. Why? Because verse 9 shows the King riding upon the ass and upon the colt, which would suggest that the ass and the colt are the same animal. Common sense, along with Mark 11 and Luke 19, tells us that Jesus rode only a single donkey into the city.

But what then about Matthew 21? Those verses clearly mention two donkeys: an ass and the colt of that ass.

Here is the charge that is laid against Matthew by some modern critics: Matthew simply invented a second animal because his wooden reading of the Hebrew parallelism told him that it was needed. That charge is ridiculous.

For starters, it is beyond laughable to think that some professor whacking away at his word processor in 2017 knows more about Hebrew parallelism than did Matthew, the educated Hebrew tax collector of the first century.

Second, beyond the fact that Matthew was inspired, we know from the rest of Matthew's book how careful Matthew was with historical facts and their relation to Old Testament prophecies.

And, third, and perhaps most importantly, Zechariah 9:9 mentions two donkeys! The colt and the mother of the colt. So how can Matthew possibly be faulted for mentioning two donkeys!

But why does Matthew mention both donkeys while Mark and Luke mention only one?

First, that difference is not a contradiction. If you have two donkeys, then you also have one donkey. Nowhere do we see the phrase “only one.” There are many examples where one gospel writer provided a more detailed description of some event than did another gospel writer. That's why God gave us multiple inspired witnesses.

Second, that Mark and Luke cited only one donkey confirms our view that Zechariah 9:9 is describing the King as riding only one donkey. And that is most likely why Mark and Luke mentioned only one donkey even though Matthew tells us there were two.

But one question remains: why, as Matthew tells us, did Jesus *ask* for both donkeys to be brought to him even though he would ride only one? Why did Jesus ask for the young colt that he would ride and also ask for the mother of that young colt?

The colt that Jesus rode was a young animal that had never been ridden but that was still running behind the female donkeys. That colt was about to have a frightening new experience, made more so by the great noise of the crowd, and Jesus wanted to make sure its mother was nearby!

That was no doubt partly because the colt would be better behaved with its mother in sight, but I think there may be another reason as well. Jesus cared about that colt and its mother!

***Luke 12:6** — Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?*

Yes, Jesus is the King of kings who upholds all things by the word of his power. But Jesus also cares about sparrows and donkeys. Do you think Alexander cared about such things? Jesus did, and he still does. And when we see Jesus that way, we are seeing Jesus as he is pictured here in Zechariah 9:9. That, I think, is why Matthew recorded all of those details. They tell us something more about Jesus.

10 And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth.

Verse 9 described the coming King. Verse 10 describes the coming *Kingdom*. That coming King, of course, is Jesus, and the coming Kingdom is his church, the church of Christ that was established in Acts 2. Verse 10 tells us three things about the church of Christ.

First, the church of Christ would be a *peaceful* kingdom. All of the implements of battle would be cut off — the chariot, the horse, and the battle bow. Instead, the King would speak peace. Unlike Alexander's kingdom, the kingdom of the coming Prince of Peace would *not* be established by earthly force. Instead, Jesus would conquer men from within. He would conquer men's thoughts.

***2 Corinthians 10:3-5** — For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: 4 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) 5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.*

Second, the church of Christ would be a *united* kingdom. The people of God in this verse are designated as "Ephraim" (the Northern tribes) and "Jerusalem" (the Southern tribes). By describing the people of God in the coming kingdom in these terms, the text is telling us that the coming kingdom would be united. They would be one body.

This is the same great event that was prophesied by Hosea.

***Hosea 1:4-11** — . . . for yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel. . . . for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away. . . . **for ye are not my people**, and I will not be your God. . . . and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God. Then shall the children of Judah and the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land: for great shall be the day of Jezreel.*

Notice how the Northern tribes were considered by God after they were scattered — “for ye are not my people.” They were considered like Gentiles. But one day, Hosea says, that would all be different. One day, the Northern tribes would once again be God’s people, and they and Judah would live under one head. When did that happen? When did Christ preach peace to the heathen, as we see here in Zechariah 9:10?

We know when that happened. Ephesians 2 tells us when that happened.

Ephesians 2:14-17 — *For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.*

And Romans tell us when Hosea was fulfilled.

Romans 9:23-26 — *And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, 24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? 25 As he saith also in [Hosea], I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. 26 And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.*

The prophecy from Hosea and the parallel prophecy from Zechariah were both fulfilled by the establishment of the eternal kingdom in Acts 2, as described in Ephesians 2.

So far we have seen that Zechariah was telling the people that the coming kingdom of Christ would be a peaceful kingdom and a united kingdom.

Third, the church of Christ would be a *universal* kingdom. “His dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth.” That phrase is an idiom that simply means everywhere.

The kingdom of Christ would not be limited to the Jews or to the promised land. Instead, it would extend to all people and all nations, just as Abraham had been promised in Genesis 12.

There are no racial barriers or national barriers or economic barriers or educational barriers in the kingdom. The doors are open to all who will hear and obey the gospel of Christ. To the Christian, there are only two groups of people in the world — those in Christ and those out of Christ. If we set up any other partition, then we are not following God’s plan for his church. The church of Christ is a universal kingdom.

By the way, the word “Catholic” means universal, and so if anyone ever asks for your opinion about the Catholic church, you should take that as a teaching opportunity. The Lord’s church is catholic (universal), but the “Catholic Church” as that term is used today is not the Lord’s church.

11 As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water.

Verse 11 is a beautiful verse. It opens with the phrase, “as for thee also.” Who is “thee”? It is the people of God, to whom Zechariah is relaying this message from God. It is the people of God who are living in their ruined city under the dominion of a foreign power. It is the people of God yearning to be set free. Would that ever happen?

God’s promise here is that, yes, it would happen. They would be released from their prison and set free.

The figure of the “pit wherein is no water” reminded the people of the desperate circumstances of Joseph in Genesis 37:22 and of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 38:6.

Jeremiah 38:6 — *Then took they Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire.*

How can anyone escape from the pit with no water? How can anyone escape who is sunk deep in the mire?

How? Verse 11 tells us how — “by the blood of thy covenant.” Which covenant is that? We know the answer to that question! A moment ago we saw this chapter quoted in Matthew 21. Keep reading in Matthew:

Matthew 26:28 — *For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*

The king who rode that young donkey into Jerusalem in Matthew 21 is the same king who shed his blood to establish the new covenant in Matthew 26. It is through his blood, and only through his blood, that anyone can ever escape the pit in which there is no water.

Colossians 1:13-14 — *Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.*

Ephesians 1:7 — *In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.*

Colossians 1:14 — *In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.*

Hebrews 9:13-14 — *For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: 14 How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

Revelation 1:5 — *And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed (or freed) us from our sins in his own blood.*

That is the message of verse 11. And we often sing about the same message.

“Would you be free from the burden of sin? There's power in the blood, power in the blood. Would you o'er evil a victory win? There's wonderful power in the blood.”

The way out of that pit is through the blood of Christ. That is the message of verse 11.

12 Turn you to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope: even to day do I declare that I will render double unto thee; 13 When I have bent Judah for me, filled the bow with Ephraim, and raised up thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece, and made thee as the sword of a mighty man.

Verse 12 contains one of the most well-known phrases in the book of Zechariah — “prisoners of hope.” But as with so many well-known phrases in the Bible (such as “the truth shall make you free,”) this one has suffered greatly from being often lifted out of its context. Desmond Tutu, for example, famously referred to himself as the “prisoner of hope.” What does it really mean?

To answer that we need to compare verse 11 with verse 12. In verse 11 we also have prisoners, but they are *freed* prisoners. Here in verse 12 it appears that they *remain* prisoners, albeit prisoners of hope. How do we explain that?

The answer is that there is a change of time frame between verse 11 and verse 12, just as there was a change of time frame between verse 8 (discussing Alexander the Great) and verse 9 (discussing Christ). The discussion about Christ and his kingdom that started in verse 9 ended in verse 11 with the freeing of prisoners by the blood of the new covenant. That the prisoners remain prisoners in verse 12 tells us that verse 12 has backed up in time from verse 11, but how far? What is the time frame of verse 12 and the verses that follow?

Verse 13 answers that question: “and raised up thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece.” Although verse 8 promised that Jerusalem would be protected against Alexander the Great, verse 13 tells us that there will still be a conflict between the Jews and the Greeks. These verses describe that conflict, which occurred in the time between the testaments (which we discussed in detail in our study of Daniel).

We sometimes describe the time between the testaments as *the silent period*. And that description is correct in the sense that no books of the Bible were penned during that time. But God’s word is not silent as to what would happen and what did happen in that time period. We are about to see a description of it here, as we did in our study of Daniel.

To begin, let’s review the history of that time.

After the death of Alexander the Great, Greece was split into four pieces that were ruled by his four generals: Cassander in Macedonia and Greece; Lysimachus eastward in Thrace and Asia Minor; Ptolemy in Egypt, Cyprus and nearby Asia Minor; Seleucus to the Indus River.

Ptolemy and his successors established themselves in Egypt and at first controlled Palestine as well. The Seleucids on the other hand controlled Mesopotamia and Syria.

There was constant friction between these two groups, and as was often the case, Palestine became a battlefield.

In 200 BC, the Seleucids gained Palestine from the Ptolemies at the Battle of Panias.

Initially the Seleucid rule was popular with the Jews. According to Josephus, Antiochus III eased the tax burden considerably.

However, he soon came in conflict with Rome and after several defeats was forced to pay a large annual indemnity. This meant he had to tax the Jews more heavily, and understandably his popularity began to wane.

Antiochus III was killed in 187 BC while raiding a temple treasury in Elam in order to pay off the Romans.

His successor, Seleucus IV, continued this policy by plotting unsuccessfully to rob the temple treasury in Jerusalem. He was assassinated in 175 BC.

As one might expect, this period gave rise to Jewish opposition and the gradual emergence of a nationalistic movement.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power after the death of his brother, Seleucus IV. He needed to unify his empire against the threats of Rome to the west, Parthia to the east, and Egypt to the south.

He sought to accomplish this unity by fostering Hellenism; that is, by encouraging the adoption of Greek culture and ideals. He particularly identified with Zeus and took the name Theos Epiphanes ("the god appearing") because he considered himself to be a divine personification of Zeus.

Due to the Roman taxes, he was virtually penniless when he assumed the throne, so he increased taxes and continued to rob temples.

Although they all disliked the taxes, the Jews were divided about Hellenism. Younger Jews were eager to adopt Greek culture and integrate it into Jewish society, but most older Jews were uncompromising traditionalists.

Matters came to a head in Jerusalem when two men tried to out bribe each other in an effort to have Antiochus make them high priest. The winner supported the establishment of a Greek gymnasium within sight of the temple. There, young men (including priests) studied Greek culture and took part in sports.

The intertestamental book of First Maccabees contains the following description:

Whereupon they built a place of exercise at Jerusalem according to the custom of the heathen. And made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathen.

Greek sports were conducted without clothing. Also, when First Maccabees says that they made themselves uncircumcised, it is not just speaking figuratively. Some of the Jews actually tried to reverse their circumcision with surgery.

Later, the High Priest (who had obtained that position by paying Antiochus a bribe) assisted the king in plundering the temple and said nothing while Antiochus murdered citizens and nearly destroyed the city.

Later, an altar to Zeus was built in the temple and sacrifices were offered on it. And this was not all. Antiochus issued decrees forbidding the practice of Jewish religion on pain of torture and death. The Sabbath and the Jewish feasts were not to be observed and circumcision was forbidden. Copies of the Torah were to be destroyed, and Jews were to be forced to offer sacrifices of pigs to Zeus and eat the meat of the sacrifice.

One elderly priest, Mattathias, refused to sacrifice to Zeus and, with his five sons, rose up and killed the king's officers who were trying to force him to comply.

This event led to the Maccabean Revolt, which eventually gave rise to the first independent Jewish nation since before the Babylonian captivity. This nation lasted only 79 years. In 63 BC, the Romans under Pompey conquered Jerusalem and once again the Jews were under foreign domination.