

20 August 2023

Luke's Good News: In Jerusalem

Luke 19-22

Luke sits at his desk.

My dear Theophilus,

In these letters to you on the life of Jesus, I have had occasion to describe the opposition that he faced from the religious leaders of the Jewish temple. This is not so surprising. Can you imagine how the priests of the Acropolis in Athens would respond to one who said that they had been serving Athena all wrong? Religious leaders are, after all, leaders, and the main thing that leaders do is work to secure their positions. That is the way of the kingdoms of earth. Jesus, of course, taught the kingdom of God, but rulers do not take kindly to rival kingdoms of any type, and when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he was entering the very seat of their power.

But at last, Jesus and his followers arrived. They crested a hill opposite Mount Zion, where the temple stands, and Jesus paused. "Jerusalem," he murmured, tears filling his eyes. "If only you had listened to the words of the prophets, teaching you the way of peace. But you would not hear, and now you cannot. I am sorry for the destruction that approaches." Then he turned to his friends and said, "Before we go in, why don't you two go into the city and bring me the ass's colt you find there. If anyone challenges you, just say the Lord needs it."

So they did, finding everything just as Jesus had told them, and returned to Jesus with the colt for him to ride. I suspect that while they were in the city they talked to more people than just the ass's owner, though, because by the time Jesus had started up the road toward the city gates, everyone in Jerusalem seemed to know who was coming. They rushed out of the city, lining the road and waving palm branches and cloths and throwing their cloaks into the road to make a carpet for the latest messiah. They were shouting a line from one of their psalms, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

The temple priests were not at all pleased with the cheering, especially since it was directed at someone else, and they were probably most displeased of all with the word "king." Some of them met him at the gates, saying, "Sir, tell the rabble to be quiet and stop disturbing the peace." Jesus just smiled and said, "If they were silent, then the stones themselves would shout." Then he looked away from them and continued down the road that led to the temple.

Now I must pause to say something about the Jews' temple. This was their second temple. Their first one, built long ago by King David's son Solomon had been thought to be the footstool of God and as such could never be destroyed. Some of their prophets had said that that wasn't so, that God was bigger than a building, that the temple *could* fall. Those prophets were rejected, beaten, and sometimes killed, but they were right: that temple was destroyed. You might think that would teach a lesson, but when the Jews were able to rebuild their temple, they quickly began treating it again as the indestructible footstool of God. To speak ill of the temple was the most serious blasphemy of all.

And Jesus immediately caused a riot in that temple. Entering her outer court, he saw merchants in their stalls, bartering with worshipers for their sacrifices, and he erupted in fury. "The prophets say that this is to be a house of prayer!" he shouted. "But you have made it a den

of robbers!” The religious leaders seethed, but surrounded as Jesus was by adoring crowds, they dared not arrest him.

So began a tumultuous week. Jesus went every day to the temple, where he taught the crowds, reminding them of the words of the law and prophets that called for mercy and justice for the poor rather than pomp and sacrifice. The priests hated him with a violent passion, but all they could think to do was to try to trap him somehow in his teaching. Once they came to him and said, “By whose authority do you teach these things?” Obviously, they hoped that he would claim to speak by the authority of God, which would sound like blasphemy. Jesus replied, “I’ll answer that if you’ll answer a question for me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven or from man?” The priests hesitated. They had rejected John, too, so they couldn’t say he had come from God, but John had become a martyred prophet in the eyes of the crowds. “We don’t know,” they finally mumbled.

“Then I won’t answer your question either.” Jesus looked around at the crowds. “Let me tell you a story. Once there was a man who planted a vineyard, then leased it to some farmers in return for a share of the harvest each year while he moved to a different land. At harvest time, he sent a slave to receive his share, but the farmers – thinking that a distant landlord could be ignored – beat the slave and sent him back empty-handed. The man sent another slave, then another, but the tenants treated them even worse. At last the man said, ‘I’ll send my son.’ Then they’ll know that I mean it, and they’ll do what they promised. But the farmers said to themselves, ‘That’s the heir! Let’s kill him! Then we’ll have it all!’ And so they did.

“Now what do you suppose that man will do to the farmers who failed to keep their end of the covenant?” The priests stared at him in silent hatred. “Don’t you think he will take the vineyard away from them and give it to someone else?” Jesus looked around him at the temple walls. “Didn’t Isaiah say once that the stone that the builders had rejected would one day become the cornerstone?”

They tried another trick question the next day. “Master,” one said, “is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” A simple question, you might say, but in Jerusalem anyone who avowed service of any kind to the emperor was seen as a traitor. Jesus said, “Do you have a coin on you? Let me see it.” He looked at it. “Whose picture is this on it?”

“Caesar’s,” the man said.

“Ah, then why don’t you give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s?”

Or again, one day some Sadducees came with a question. I won’t bore you, Theophilus, with a recitation of the rival factions of the Jewish faith, but the Sadducees were the upper class group – including the priests – and one of their distinctive teachings was that they didn’t believe in a resurrection after death. They came with a complicated hypothetical situation. “Imagine a woman who marries a man who dies. So she marries his brother, as the law would require, but he dies too. So she marries the next brother, then the next, until she had married seven brothers. Then the woman died. So, in this ‘resurrection’ that you talk of, whose wife is she?”

Jesus said, “Why do you assume there is marriage in the resurrection? Are angels married?” The Sadducees had no answer. There was a lot of that going around. But Jesus went on, “But that wasn’t really what you were asking, was it? You simply wanted to mock the idea of eternal life. So let me ask you something. Remember when God appeared to Moses in the desert?

How did God identify himself? He said, ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,’ right? Not ‘I *was*’ or ‘I *used to be*.’ And why would God identify himself as the God of dead men, anyway? No, he is not the God of the dead but of the living.” Eventually, the priests left him alone. Setting out to embarrass Jesus, they had only embarrassed themselves.

Jesus continued teaching in the temple, and one day he heard a loud clashing noise. A rich man had brought his offering to place in the collection box at the busiest hour of the day and had poured it slowly into the box so as to clink and clang for all to appreciate. The rich man piously bowed, then minced away with every eye on him. Except Jesus’ eyes. He was watching a poor widow who had waited patiently for the rich man to finish before stepping up to the box to drop in two copper coins. “Did you see that?” Jesus asked. “Now *that’s* what I call generosity!”

“I know, right?” one of his followers said. “That man must have given hundreds of denarii!”

“Not the man,” Jesus said. “That man gave from his surplus. How is it generous to give what you have no need of? No, I meant that widow over there who has nothing to give but gave anyway.”

His friends were confused. “Maybe so, but let’s be practical. Her tiny offering isn’t going to go very far in keeping this temple going. Look at this place!”

“Yes,” Jesus said. “Look at it. Commit it to memory. Because the days are coming when this temple will be no more. Not one stone will be left on another.”

The twelve were aghast. “When? When will this happen?”

Jesus shook his head. “Have you ever heard me answer a question that begins with ‘when’? *When* doesn’t matter. But I will say this: when you see the armies surrounding Jerusalem, head for the hills. Those will be hard days, but those days are not the end. Your task is not to predict the movements of the kingdoms of this earth, or to build magnificent temples. Your task is to establish a different kind of kingdom, one that will not be destroyed.”

That week was the week of the Jews’ great festival of Unleavened Bread and the Passover, when they remember how God had delivered them from the kingdom of Egypt. They celebrate this festival with the sacrifice of an unblemished lamb and a solemn feast in each family home. Jesus and his followers, a new kind of family, gathered on the Passover evening for that sacred feast. When they were all gathered at the table, Jesus said, “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been wanting to have this feast with you. This will be my last one before the new kingdom breaks in. This wine will be the last wine I drink before all is accomplished.” Then he took some of the bread, snapped it and handed it out. “Here is the bread of deliverance, but let it now represent a new deliverance, from a new sacrifice. This broken bread is my body.” Slowly, they all ate from the bread.

Then Jesus took a cup and said, “Share this around. Everyone take a drink. This is the wine of covenant, but let it now represent a new covenant, sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you all.” One by one they drank from the cup. “That’s right,” he added. “All of you drink, even the one who will betray me.”

“Betray you!” one of them exclaimed! Immediately they began arguing about which one of them Jesus was talking about. “Maybe *he* might betray the Master, but not me!” “Oh yeah! I’ll

bet I'm a greater disciple than any of you!" "I'll tell you this: in the new kingdom, I'm going to be —"

"Enough!" cried Jesus. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. "In the kingdoms of this earth, men fight for the highest place. Let them do it, but this is not the way of my kingdom. Have I ever striven for high position? No, I have been a servant among you. It is why I have come, as you shall soon see."

The twelve were silent, still not understanding. But as Jesus had said, soon they would.

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We are almost there, my dear Theophilus, to the part that makes this story unlike any other. But for now I must pause. This is harder to write than I had expected.

Until next time, your friend, Luke.