

The Greatest Prophecy

Matthew 20:17-19

Series: Easter 2022: Prophet, Priest and King

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Worship: Ride on to Die

Key Sentence: Jesus the prophet made the greatest prophecy in all of Scripture

Outline:

Introduction: Prophet, Priest and King

I. The greatest irony (Palm Sunday)

II. The greatest accuracy (Good Friday, Easter Sunday)

III. The greatest significance (The Sacrifice and Resurrection of the Son of Man)

Matthew 20:17–19 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸“See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”

The Greatest Prophecy Matthew 20:17-19

I recently read a book called *Man of Sorrows, King of Glory*, by Jonty Rhodes. It's a small book, easy to read in a day or two, but it makes a great point, which will in fact structure our meditations for Easter week this year. With a title like *Man of Sorrows, King of Glory* it's obviously about the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the point of the book is that the sorrow of Christ is more than his death and the glory of Christ is more than his resurrection. Those are the central realities, but there is a lot of territory around them.

The book teaches this truth through a paradigm Christians have used for centuries, the offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King. The word office essentially means a job description: what work does Christ do? Jonty says Christ's work in the most general sense is to be the Messiah, the anointed one. But in the Old Testament there were three distinct kinds of people who were anointed, the prophets, the priests and the kings of Israel. Jesus' work as Messiah is to be prophet, priest and king. Jonty quotes the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Question 23 says "What offices does Christ execute as our redeemer?" And the answer is "Christ, as our redeemer, executes the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation." Notice the connection between the offices of Christ and the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. Jonty says "Alongside Christ's threefold office, [the catechism] also speaks of Christ's two states: the state of humiliation and the state of exaltation. These two states describe Jesus's journey. His humiliation begins at the incarnation and takes him through to his burial. His exaltation begins at his resurrection and ends—well, in one sense, never!"

Jesus is our prophet, and he made the greatest prophecy in all of Scripture. He is our priest because he offered a perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins – the sacrifice of himself. He is our king because he reigns forever and ever. We're going to explore these things this Easter. Today we'll focus on Jesus as prophet, and we'll see how that fits with Palm Sunday. Thursday we'll focus on Jesus as the great high priest who offered the perfect sacrifice. Next Sunday we'll see that the Resurrection was the first step in his exaltation so that he now reigns over all things as king.

How is Jesus the greatest prophet? There are several ways. First, the words Jesus spoke were the word of God. The Old Testament prophets spoke God's word to his people. "Hear the word of the Lord."

Jesus did the same, but as God the Son, all his words were God's word. He says in John "the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." It is an authoritative word. He says in Matthew, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Jesus is the ultimate prophet. He perfectly brings God's word. But John teaches us, doesn't he, that Jesus not only brings us the Word of God, he is the Word of God? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. . . . and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The Word is our ultimate prophet.

Jesus was also the greatest prophet in the narrow sense of foretelling the future. The Old Testament prophets, in addition to proclaiming God's word for their own moment in Israel's history, also taught the people God's promises and foretold how he would keep them. The most profound of those prophecies were about Jesus. Isn't this what he taught the two disciples on the road to Emmaus? Luke 24:25–27 "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

But the greatest prophecies were those Jesus made about himself, about his own death and resurrection. In one of these Jesus identified himself as a prophet. Luke 13:31 "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³Nevertheless, I must go on my way today, tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.'" Jonty Rhodes says "Jesus, . . . in his own preaching ministry, explained that he had come to give his life 'as a ransom for many.' It is his explanation of the cross to which we must cling."

Depending on how you count, Jesus foretold his death or resurrection or some aspect of it three to five times in each of the Gospels. All of these are amazing, that a man would look into his own future and know it contained not only a suffering death but a victorious resurrection. But there is one that is so detailed, so ironic, so accurate and full of the truth of our salvation that I consider it the greatest prophecy in all Scripture. It's Matthew 20:17–19 *And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."*

The greatest Prophet in all Scripture made the greatest prophecy in all of Scripture. It foreshadowed the greatest irony because it contradicted Palm Sunday even before it happened. It contained the greatest accuracy, because it foretold the minute details of Jesus' passion. It revealed the greatest reality, that the Son of Man would suffer and die at the hands of sinful men, but be raised to life.

Verse 17 "And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸See, we are going up to Jerusalem." On Palm Sunday we celebrate, and rightly, the triumphal entry of our King into his city-of-old and his city-yet-to-come. I often call this the premature celebration because while it was wonderfully right to celebrate Jesus as King, it was horribly wrong for the same crowd to turn against him in less than a week and shout "Crucify, crucify." Yet Palm Sunday was a legitimate recognition of Jesus, not only as Messianic King, but as the promised prophet.

The text we read this morning, Matthew 21:1-12, recognizes both things. He was recognized as the king foretold in Zechariah, who would come humbly, riding on a donkey. He was also identified as a prophet. Matthew 21:10 "And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." The word "the" in that sentence may well be significant, for the people of Israel were waiting not just for another prophet, but for "the" prophet foretold by Moses. Deuteronomy 18:18 "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." The Jews believed this prophet would come to herald the Messiah, or some believed the prophet would be the Messiah. So in John 7:40 When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." And John 6:14, after the feeding of the five thousand, "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Yet at that moment they didn't want to make him their prophet but their king. The two promises overlapped in their minds, which was way more true than they realized.

Same thing with the Triumphal Entry. Jesus had just raised Lazarus from death and done many other miracles on his way to Jerusalem, so the crowd wanted to make him king. But they were fickle. Jesus knew, as a prophet, that their desire to make him king was the greatest irony. So, he starts this prophecy "We're going up to Jerusalem!" But not to be crowned. Palm Sunday was not his goal. He then proceeds to give the most exact prophecy in Scripture. Verse 18 "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death."

This is an exact and accurate prophecy. The chief priests were the leading priests at the temple in Jerusalem. The chief priest, singular, was described in the Old Testament. He was the only one to enter the Holy of Holies. But by this time he was appointed by Rome from a few cooperative Jewish families. The other chief priests talked about in the New Testament were other members of those families. They may have been former chief priests or others who held offices, such as Captain of the Temple Guard. The scribes were the lawyers and other officials, not necessarily from the tribe of Levi. They were probably Pharisees, though not all Pharisees were scribes. Together the chief priests and scribes made up the ruling council in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin.

Jesus says he will be delivered over to these people and condemned. We saw this same word “delivered” last week in Romans, where it was God who delivered him up for our trespasses and raised him up for our justification. But in human terms it was Judas who delivered Jesus over to the Jewish leaders. It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus knows this, knows who will do it and does not prevent it from happening. So, shortly after Palm Sunday, Judas goes to the chief priests, who have already been soliciting information on Jesus’ whereabouts, and who wanted to arrest him by stealth and kill him.

On Thursday of Easter Week Jesus celebrates Passover with his disciples, institutes the Lord’s Supper, then goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. There he is arrested by a crowd of soldiers and temple officials, sent from the chief priests and led by the traitor Judas. The prophecy is fulfilled, and is further, exactly fulfilled when Jesus is tried and condemned. Matthew describes this in chapter 26 “Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹and said, “This man said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.’ ” ⁶²And the high priest stood up and said, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?”

⁶³But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” ⁶⁴Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶What is your judgment?” They answered, “He deserves death.” ⁶⁷Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, ⁶⁸saying, “Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”

Notice in these verses that Jesus is judged for a prophecy, and it's a prophecy of his death. That's what he meant when he said "I am able to destroy this temple and in three days raise it up." Notice too that he is condemned. "What is your judgment?" "He deserves death." Finally notice that even as they are humiliating him with spittle and blows they are asking him to prophesy. It is clear that his role of prophet was very well recognized as key to his ministry.

Verse 18 is exactly and accurately fulfilled. So is verse 19 "and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." The Jewish council, had no power under the Romans to impose death. They could only recommend. Matthew 27:1 "When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ²And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor." They delivered him over to the Gentiles, as Jesus prophesied. Pilate was reluctant to have him crucified, finding no fault in him.

Matthew 27:24–31 "When Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." ²⁵And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. ²⁷The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. ²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. Kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹When they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe, put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him."

Mocked and flogged and crucified. The word scourged in Matthew 27:26 means flogged, but the footnote in the English Standard Version says that scourging is "a Roman judicial penalty, consisting of a severe beating with a multi-lashed whip containing embedded pieces of bone and metal." That's what Jesus endured, followed by the cruelest mockery, followed by the ultimate cruelty of crucifixion. And Jesus foresaw and foretold it all.

Crucifixion is universally regarded as one of the most painful and merciless causes of death. The Romans regarded it as such and would not use it on citizens or soldiers, except in the case of desertion. Instead it was used as a form of execution, often mass execution of traitors or rebels, almost always in public places like a hill or a highway so that it would be a deterrent to others.

Even a short description of this physical torture horrifies us. Beaten and flogged, Jesus is nailed to the cross with huge nails, some of which have been found embedded in the bones of victims. He is suspended, arms outstretched or over his head, his weight supported only by his pierced wrists and feet. If he pushes up with his legs to breathe he suffers agony in his feet, if he sags down he suffers it in his wrists, but then he must push up again to get the next breath. This goes on for hours until his heart starts to fail from the blood loss and strain. His lungs slowly fill with fluid, suffocating him. Finally in agony he cries out and gives up his spirit. This is what Jesus prophesied. This is what he endured, and this is what he knew he would endure.

I consider this the most exact and accurate prophesy. Many of the prophesies of the Old Testament were symbolic or visual. Think of Pharoah's dream of seven fat cows and seven lean cows. While gripping, it is far from a literal description of the horrors of famine. Even more abstract are Daniel's pictures of kingdoms in the form of statues, or many headed beasts. This is not abstract. This is a plain, unromantic recitation of horror. Jesus knew this prophecy would come true in detail, but he walked this road to Jerusalem and endured the irony of Palm Sunday so that the redemption of the cross could be ours.

These prophesies, of course, have been disputed. They are so accurate, so exact that no liberal scholar, no skeptic of miracles can believe that Jesus actually knew these things or said these things. Doesn't it make more sense to think that somebody put these words in Jesus' mouth after the events had happened? In my opinion and that of many Christian scholars, no, that doesn't make more sense. For one thing the testimony of the Old Testament, including Isaiah 53 which we looked at last week, points to a suffering servant. Psalm 22 written hundreds of years before Christ, prophesies the events of the cross with eerie accuracy. Furthermore the narrative flow of the Gospels makes no sense without the climax of the crucifixion, and even more, the resurrection. Why else did Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem? He certainly wasn't preparing to defeat the Romans in a pitched battle. His little band had at most two swords against their thousands.

Carson, in his excellent commentary on Matthew, discusses the criticism of these prophesies. Those who do not dismiss them out of hand attempt to point at something in Scripture or history to make them historically credible. Of course it's not wrong to point to Isaiah 53 or other Old Testament passages that describe the suffering of the Messiah. Jesus himself will do so on the road to Emmaus. But Carson critiques even these approaches, and I agree with him.

He says “These approaches seek to make some part of Jesus’ passion predictions historically credible through some historical antecedent on which Jesus allegedly based his predictions. While this is not wrong, it is too restrictive for dealing with one who claims exclusive and intimate knowledge of the Father. Is it reasonable to think that Jesus could have predicted the details of his passion only if he read about them somewhere? This is not to question the applicability of some of the OT allusions to him; it is rather to question the historical reductionism of some Gospel research.” In other words we need to let Jesus be who he was: God and Man, God the Son, the promised Messiah whose role as Messiah made him the perfect prophet, priest and king.

If we accept that Jesus said these things prophetically, then this is certainly among the most exact and accurate prophecies in Scripture. What can we compare this to? What if I had stood in this pulpit three months ago on January 10th and told you that Russia would in fact invade Ukraine. You might not consider me a prophet because several intelligence agencies were already predicting the invasion. But what if I told you the Russians would be stopped outside Kyiv, and that exactly 39 days after the initial invasion Ukrainian troops and reporters would return to the embattled town of Bucha and find a massacre. What if I told you three months ago that by April 6th the funeral director from the town would report over 300 bodies. What if I told you that Andriy Dvornikov, who drove a mini-bus for a company in Kyiv would be found with his hands tied behind his back, shot through the head. All of this three months ago, all perfectly accurate. Would you consider me a prophet, maybe even a great prophet? This prophecy of Jesus is more exact, more accurate than that.

Furthermore, this prophecy is of a greater thing than any other prophecy and with this I want to close. This prophecy is greater because this prophecy is not about incidentals, as you might accuse the Palm Sunday prophecies of being. This prophecy is about the essential truth of salvation, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Verse 19 ends with the simple assertion “and he will be raised on the third day.” This prophecy is exact, accurate and significant.

To show this I want to point to two places in Scripture, one right here and one in the epistles. The immediate assertion of the meaning of this prophecy is found just ten verses down. Beginning in verse 20 the mother of two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, comes forward to ask Jesus a question. Can these two young men, also known as the sons of Zebedee, sit at Jesus’ right hand in his kingdom? Jesus, remembering his own prophecy, asks if they can drink the cup he’s about to drink. Instead of rebuking them he tells them that they will drink the cup he drinks, a prophecy that they will die following him.

When the other disciples grow indignant at James and John for putting themselves forward, Jesus says “whoever would be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.” Finally, and this is the point, Jesus support his teaching from his own example. Verse 28 “even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Do you see this? The prophecy of his death and resurrection is the greatest prophecy because it predicts the greatest sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Son of Man to pay the ransom for the many who are caught in the bondage and slavery of sin. It’s not just a random death and resurrection that he prophesies. It’s a death and resurrection that ransoms.

Later in the New Testament Jesus’ disciples repeatedly teach the significance of his death and resurrection. The high point is 1st Corinthians 15 beginning at verse 3. Before I read it let me say that many Biblical scholars now consider these verses to be the oldest creed or doctrinal statement of the Christian church. They teach that Paul is quoting this as an already well-established summary of the faith. Verse 3: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.”

Jesus’ prophecy of his own death and resurrection is the greatest prophecy in Scripture because it was the most ironic. He went up to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday not to be crowned but crucified. It was the most exact and accurate. No one could give this level of detail without being a true prophet. It was the most significant. It foretold the event of greatest importance by which we would be saved from our sins.

Jesus is the greatest prophet. He is also the greatest priest and the greatest king. We’ll look at his priestly role Thursday night and his eternal and present kingship on Easter Sunday morning.