

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #143:**

## **“GO FETCH A DONKEY”**

**By John Temples**

It was Sunday, the beginning of the final week of Jesus’s earthly ministry. Many crucial and important events would take place during this week, culminating in His death and resurrection. But the week began with an odd assignment from Jesus to His disciples. Matthew records it as follows:

“Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord has need of them,” and immediately he will send them.’ All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.”’ So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’” (Matthew 21:1-9)

The place where this happened was a small village called Bethphage (“house of figs”) near Jerusalem. It was on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, near Bethany. Bethphage is mentioned in the Bible only in this account. The town’s only claim to fame was that it furnished the donkey Christ rode in His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. An interesting fact: this is the only time Jesus used “public transportation”!

Why did Jesus send two disciples on this odd errand? It seems unnecessary. They were either approaching the village and passing close by; Jesus could have easily walked into the village and procured the donkey Himself.

And why did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt? Here are several reasons:

*First, to render to Jesus the honor due Him as King.* Donkeys (along with mules) were ridden by kings and other prominent persons in parades and when entering cities. In modern parades, dignitaries ride horses; but horses were scarce in Israel. And besides, horses were used for war, not pageantry. Donkeys were the "limos" of the day. Abraham rode a donkey (Genesis 22:3), as did Abigail, the wife of Nabal (1 Samuel 25:42). Balaam, the mongrel prophet, rode a donkey (a talking one, Numbers 22:21).

At this point, many of the Lord's disciples had forsaken Him (John 6:66). A relentless "gaslighting" campaign by the Jewish leaders had taken its toll on the public perception of His identity. For the rest of the week, Jesus would be assailed by His enemies, arrested and beaten by the Romans, and brutally killed. So before the stream of insults began, God allowed His Son proper honors--a "ticker-tape parade," if you will--as He entered Jerusalem for the last time.

*Second, to fulfill Scripture.* An obscure prophecy, Zechariah 9:9, said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you. He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey." This prophecy was acknowledged by the Jews as Messianic; and by fulfilling this Scripture, Christ definitely laid claim to the office of Messiah.

*Third, Jesus's prominent entry into the city forced the Jewish leaders to act.* It was the beginning of Passover, and since Jesus had been declared to be "the Lamb of God who would take away sin" (John 1:29), He had to die at that season to fulfill the Old Testament type. The Jewish leaders had already agreed that Jesus must die, but "not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people" (Mark 14:2). By making a grand entrance befitting a king, Jesus forced their hand. They would follow God's timetable of events, either willingly or unwillingly.

But back to our original question: Why did Jesus send two disciples to fetch this donkey? As we noted, it would have been no trouble for Jesus to fetch the donkey Himself. Here are some possible reasons:

*First, to allow them to have a part in fulfilling Scripture.* Jesus was the subject of Zechariah's prophecy, but He graciously allowed His disciples to share in its fulfillment.

*Second, to teach them (and us) that the common or mundane things we do might have everlasting significance.* Fetching a donkey definitely falls into the "lowly errand" category. As we lead our ordinary lives, do our chores, and raise our children, we might think that we are doing nothing important. But we cannot tell what impact we might be having. We might even be fulfilling Scripture ourselves, or facilitating God's providential working in the lives of ourselves or others. "And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

*Third, to teach the disciples humility.* This was a lesson they all sorely needed. Just a little while before this, James and John had come to Jesus asking for prominent positions in Jesus's kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). And the other ten disciples were angry when they heard what James and John had done (probably because they had not thought to do it first). Christ was in the shadow of the cross, and all His disciples could think of was their own personal advancement and glory. So what did the Lord do? While they dreamed of dominion, He sent them to fetch a donkey!

Jesus sent two disciples. I wonder which ones? My money is on James and John! Just picture these two dignified disciples, who had cast out demons and preached mightily in the name of the Lord, struggling to get a stubborn donkey to cooperate!

What is the life lesson for us? When we get inflated ideas of our own importance, God might providentially set some lowly task in front of us. He sends us to fetch donkeys. And we ought to welcome such opportunities.

*Fourth, to teach the disciples trust.* Jesus did not explain to the disciples why He needed that donkey; He just said "go and get it." No doubt the two disciples also worried about resistance from the owner of the animals. He was teaching them to obey Him without questioning. They needed to drink of the spirit of Abraham, who went out at God's command, not knowing where he went.

*Fifth, to teach the disciples (and us) consistency.* These men had obeyed Jesus when He empowered them to preach to large crowds or to cast out demons-- would they be just as willing to go fetch a donkey for Him? Life consists of a few great moments and a whole lot of small ones. Sometimes it is actually easier to rise to meet a crisis or a major challenge than it is to faithfully live our lives in quietness and routine. The real test of a Christian is not always in Jerusalem; sometimes it is in Bethphage!

So remember these lessons from this event:

- The small, everyday things we do may have everlasting significance.
- We need to pray for and practice humility. When we get carried away with our own importance, God might set a lowly task in front of us to bring us back to earth.
- We need to trust and obey God, whether we understand His requirements or not.
- Don't just be a "fair weather" or "big job" Christian. Be just as energetic about driving a fellow Christian to the doctor as with preaching to a crowd.
- The real test of our Christian devotion is not always in Jerusalem-- sometimes it is in Bethphage.

In closing, the comments of Charles Spurgeon are fitting:

"The time was for our Lord to finish his great work on earth, and his going up to Jerusalem was with this intent. He now determines to enter his capital city openly, and there to reveal himself as King. To this end, when he came near to the city, Jesus sent two disciples to bring him the foal of an ass whereon he would ride. His orders to the two disciples whom he commissioned, when they were come to Bethphage, are worthy of our serious attention. He directed them to the place where they should find the animal: 'Go into the village over against you.' The Lord knows where that which he requires is to be found. Perhaps it is nearer to us than we dream: 'over against you.' He told them that they would not have to search: 'straightway ye shall find.' When the Lord sends us on an errand, he will speed us on our way. He described the condition of the creatures: 'an ass tied, and a

colt with her.' Our Lord knows the position of every animal in the world, and he counts no circumstances to be beneath his notice. Nor did he leave the disciples without orders how they were to proceed: 'loose them, and bring them.' Demur and debate there would be none; they might act at once. To stand questioning is not for the messengers of our King: it is their duty to obey their Lord's orders, and to fear nothing. The two animals would be willingly yielded up by their owner when the disciples said, 'The lord hath need of them;' nay, he would not only give them up, but 'straightway he will send them.' Either the owner was himself a secret disciple, or some awe of the Lord Jesus was on his mind, but he would right joyfully consent to lend the ass and its foal for the purpose for which they were required. What a singular conjunction of words is here, 'the Lord' and 'hath need'! Jesus, without laying aside his sovereignty, had taken a nature full of needs; yet, being in need, he was still the Lord, and could command his subjects, and requisition their property. Whenever we have anything of which the Lord's cause has need, how cheerfully should we hand it over to him! The owner of the ass and her colt regarded it as an honour to furnish Jesus with a creature to ride upon. How great is the power of Jesus over human minds, as that by a word he quietly moves them to do his bidding! We have here the record of two disciples being sent to fetch an ass: those who do little things for Jesus are honoured thereby. Their errand appeared strange, for what they did might seem like robbery; but he who sent them took care to protect them from the least shade of suspicion. The messengers raised no question, offered no objection and met with no difficulty. It is ours to do what Jesus bids us, just as he bids us, and because he bids us; for his command is our authority.

Go fetch a donkey sometime. It will do you good. And the rewards and blessings are immeasurable. --John Temples