



THE I AM PROJECT, PART VII RETURN OF THE KING

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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Today is the ninth of April. Historically speaking, it's been a quiet day. Not too many earth shattering events have happened on April 9th down through the years. But it was on this day – April 9th – in 1483, that a new king of England was named. Edward IV died, leaving the realm to his son, Edward V. Now Ed Junior had been sent to live with his mother the Queen in Ludlow Castle in Wales when he got news of his father's death. He was 12 years old. So he returned to London to be crowned king. Only it never happened. His uncle Richard wormed his way in. Edward's birth was declared illegitimate and Richard was named king in his place. Edward V lived the rest of his life confined to the Tower. He was the king who wasn't.

That's not the only event we're marking today. Today is Palm Sunday, the day another king returned to town. But like Edward, there was intrigue and a plot, and he never took the throne. Just to remind ourselves of the events that first Palm Sunday, let's take a quick look at the story.

Matthew 21:1-9

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

The people had these expectations that Jesus was coming to be the new king, to overthrow the Romans and reestablish Israel as a kingdom. But it didn't happen the way they hoped.

That's the backdrop for this morning. But today is also something else. This April 9th is the last Sunday of our I Am Project. We've looked at most – not all, but most – of the statements Jesus made that started with "I Am." I am the vine. I am the good shepherd. I am the bread. I am the resurrection. I am the gate. I am the way the truth and the life. If you only caught one thing in this series, I hope it was the idea that each of these statements has to do with Jesus being God. They all help us better understand that he is much more than just a good person or teacher. His claim is to be one with God himself.

There are a lot of opinions floating out there about Jesus and who he is. I caught two news programs just this week talking about different books that have come out that supposedly reveal hidden secrets about Jesus. It's amazing how they always seem to find them right before Easter. But the books are pure fantasy. When you hear that stuff, or you hear other people talking about Jesus, how do you sort fact from fiction? Hopefully, spending this time with some of his own words will help us when we have to evaluate what we hear from other sources.

As I thought about Palm Sunday and I thought about wrapping up this series, there was one last statement that seemed the most fitting way to tie everything together. It's not only the last statement like this Jesus makes in the Bible – it's found in the very last words of the Bible.

Let's take a look at Revelation 22. I've extracted those verses that specifically deal with our topic today.

From Revelation 22

"Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book..."

"...Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. ..

...The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life...

...He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

When J.R.R. Tolkien wrote his Lord of the Rings trilogy, I've been told that his publisher was the one who chose the titles for his book. He never wanted the last one to be called "The Return of the King" because he thought it gave away the ending right up front.

I've stolen the title for Jesus, because he made it clear that he WANTS to reveal the ending. He wants us to know his plan. The final written words we have of his are that he is going to come back to earth. He said it not just once, but three times in a row.

I never had any intention of becoming a pastor back when I was in college, but my dad's a preacher, and one summer he let me give my first sermon one Sunday. I think I've blocked most of the experience from my memory. But I do know that this was the topic I preached on. I was all fired up about it and I still am to this day. Because I think that by and large, this is a message that has been lost to the church.

We really don't talk much about Jesus coming back. There are lots of reasons for this. One is that it's just been so long. For the people who saw him in person, it wasn't a big stretch to think of him as re-entering the world. But life has gone on for 2000 years since Jesus walked on earth. We've never known him in anything other than spiritual terms, so it seems very surreal to think about a literal return to earth.

It's also difficult to know what to do with the information. What does it mean for our lives that Jesus is coming back someday? We're not sure how to incorporate it into our existence.

Frankly, the few people who have taken the idea seriously have often turned out to be nutcases. Down through the years there have been all kinds of predictions of when Jesus was coming back. A book came out in 1987 with 88 reasons why Jesus would return in 1988. There have been times when people have sold their possessions and gone to wait at a specific spot they thought Jesus would return to. They ended up looking very silly because they pinned everything on that belief and it didn't happen. We don't want to be associated with that, so we don't fully embrace the idea of Jesus' return.

But Jesus said "I am coming soon." Not only that, almost every single book of the New Testament makes some reference to the idea. You can check it out for yourself. I once went through and found that there were only a couple books that don't talk about it at all. It was a core belief of the early church, as true about Jesus as the crucifixion and resurrection. They clung to the hope that he would come back like he said he would.

That's why I consider this an I AM statement, even though it is a little different than the rest. The others focus more on character, while this one seems to focus on an action plan. The others described who he is, while this one seems to describe what he will do. But I'm not so sure there's that big of a gap. It does describe who he is. It does give us a glimpse of his character. And as we reflect on it a little bit, we'll discover that it has implications for our daily lives as well.

What does it tell us about Jesus to hear him say, "I am coming soon?"

The first thing it tells me is that **He rules**.

When he comes back, he's not coming back to die again. He will be returning as king. This is what the crowds had hoped he would be fulfilling on that first Palm Sunday. That time he came to offer himself as a sacrifice. Next time he will be coming to claim as his own what that sacrifice paid for.

It's going to be far different next time. He'll be coming in all his glory. Jesus described it this way for his disciples:

Matthew 24:30

They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.

The whole world will see and recognize Jesus. You won't miss it. It will be very clear that he has complete authority. It's going to be beautiful and awesome and overwhelming to see the king of the universe in all his splendor.

When Jesus says he has a plan to come back, that means he's in charge of the schedule. It means things have not slipped out of control. His plan is not being forced on him by outside circumstances and it will not be delayed by outside circumstances. He operates on his own timetable because he rules. That's why he said,

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. ..

Ultimately, that means there will be justice. Even Job – the man who suffered such terrible losses -- recognized that:

Job 19:25

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.

Sometimes it feels like our problems will have the last word in our lives. But Jesus says, "I am the last. This grief you're experiencing – it will be lifted. This sin you're struggling with – it will be conquered. This injustice you're suffering – it will be corrected. I am on the other side of it. I will still be here. And I am coming soon."

Not only does Jesus rule – he also remembers.

He Remembers

Jesus is coming back. He didn't just do his thing on the cross and leave earth for good. He is going to come back someday. And he's coming back for us out of love for us.

In the movie, Last of the Mohicans, Daniel Day Lewis plays Hawkeye, a white man who had been raised by the Mohican tribe. Set during the French and Indian War, the story

tells how Hawkeye rescues Cora from an ambush and falls in love with her. He takes her and some other people he rescued to a secret hideaway behind a waterfall.

It turns out that the enemy finds the hideout and is coming. They will take the women prisoners, but they will kill any men. But Hawkeye isn't ready to die, so he tells Cora, "You be strong, you survive... You stay alive, no matter what occurs! I will find you. No matter how long it takes, no matter how far, I will find you." Then he dives into the waterfall. It looks like he is abandoning her, but his move is really motivated by love. He leaves so that he can come back and rescue her. He leaves because he loves her and knows it is the best hope for setting her free. And he promises that he will come back to rescue her once and for all.

There is a love story wrapped up in the idea of Jesus coming back for us. It is love that brought him here in the first place, and it is love that is going to bring him back again – that same fierce, determined, protective kind of love that Hawkeye had. Nothing can keep him away.

When a few years had gone by after Jesus said he was coming soon, the church began to get discouraged and question that love. They thought for sure Jesus would be back within their lifetime. So Peter had to set the record straight.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

What looked like abandonment was really motivated by love. Jesus has been giving time for as many people as possible to change and accept him.

If you feel abandoned by God this morning, that he has left you high and dry, know that he has not forgotten about you. Jesus sees your situation and he loves you deeply. His promise to come back is a promise for you personally as much as his death on the cross was for you personally. It stands as a reminder that he remembers us.

When I was in grade school, my sister and I used to go with my dad up to a neighbor's farm to get stuff for our garden. While my dad would be getting what he needed my sister and I would go off and explore the farm. There was a big pasture, and one time we went quite a ways out of sight of my dad. We climbed over a fence to check out some woods. Somehow we managed to make it over the fence without discovering that it was electric.

We got into the woods and we were walking along when my foot suddenly sunk down in something like quicksand. I could not pull it back up. I started to panic. Finally I yanked my foot clear out of my boot. I was scared now, so I ran back to the fence. Only this time, I grabbed the electric wire and got the shock of my life.

I let out a blood curdling scream. And what I saw next I don't think I ever saw before or after. It was my dad racing toward me across the pasture, faster than I'd ever seen him run. He didn't yell at me for being where I shouldn't be. He just saved me from my predicament. Everything was ok because my dad came for me.

Maybe your dad never did something like that for you. But that's the picture Jesus wants us to have in our heads. He is coming for us. He won't leave us stuck in the mud, even when we're where we weren't supposed to be in the first place. He races to our rescue.

Isaiah 35:3-4

*Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come,
he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."*

He sees you. He loves you. He remembers you. And he's coming soon to rescue you.

Jesus also says that when he comes back, he will reward us.

He Rewards

"...Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.

Jesus intentionally uses a phrase out of the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 40: 10

*See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him.
See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.*

Jesus is fulfilling that prophecy that Isaiah had predicted would happen some day. There is going to be a reward for following Christ. And it isn't for just a few people. Jehovah's witnesses believe only a certain number of people will be lucky enough to be in the winner's circle. But Jesus promises that his reward will be for everyone, according to what they've done. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said,

Ephesians 6:7-8

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

We live in a world where people are rewarded for having the right connections, being in the right place at the right time, having enough money. It's an unfair system, because status and politics are what make things happen. Christ doesn't care about our status. He cares about our hearts. The rewards for following him are open to everybody. And we can all know that if we listen to him and do what he's asking, we can look forward to hearing him say, "Well done. Enter into your rest."

Isaiah also used the word recompense. I don't think I've ever heard anyone else use that word. It's basically the same thing as reward, but it can also carry with it the idea of compensating someone for a loss they've suffered.

When Jesus comes back and rewards our work, he won't just be handing out prizes. He will be acknowledging the hard work and sacrifices that people have suffered for his name. He sees and he knows the cost involved in following him. And he promises that there is a great reward waiting for us.

Things may look pointless here. You've been pouring yourself into someone's life and it doesn't seem to matter. You've been working hard to change old habits and you don't feel any better. You've been trying to live a good Christian life and nobody even seems to notice. Jesus notices. And he says, "I'm coming soon. And my reward is with me."

Jesus will be returning as a king who rules, a king who remembers and loves us and a king who reward us. That's what "I am coming soon" says about him. But what does it do for us in everyday life? How do we incorporate something that hasn't yet happened into what we're doing?

The Bible talks about at least three things that the truth of Jesus coming soon gives us.

The first is that **it gives motivation.**

If you were told that Christ was for sure going to come back at 6:00 tonight, what would you change about your life? What would you want to get in order? Are there things you'd be ashamed for him to find? Would you be ready?

What if it were going to be sooner than that? What if you didn't have time to prepare? Would you be ready right now?

Jesus made it pretty clear that nobody is going to know ahead of time exactly when he'll return. He just says it could be any time. And I think the reason for the ambiguity there is because it forces us to live with a sense of expectancy. We are to be ready all the time, not just waiting to the last minute to make changes in our lives. Jesus told his disciples,

Luke 21:34-36

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch..."

What a combination – drunkenness and the anxieties of life. I think the connection is anything that takes over your life and diverts your attention. If we're focused on being ready for Christ to come back, we'll be able to rise above those things, because we will have a different perspective on life. We'll have a motivation beyond the present moment, because we know this isn't all there is, and what's more, the TRUE reality could break into this one at any time.

The second thing the return of the king gives us is **urgency**.

On Super Nanny, there was a dad who had difficulty sharing his emotions with his teenage daughter. They never communicated what they were really thinking or feeling with each other. But then he got orders that he was going to have to go to Iraq, and suddenly there was no more time to waste. So he sat down with her and finally told her how much he loved her, because he knew it might be his only chance.

You know, it's not easy to share the hope of Jesus with friends and family. We can worry about what they're going to think of us and that they might be offended. So we don't ever get to the heart of the issue.

But Jesus is coming back, and there is no time to waste. Ask the same question as before: If you knew Jesus was coming back at 6:00 tonight, is there anybody you'd like to talk to? Is there anyone who you would really like to share Jesus with that you haven't had the courage to talk to yet? What if it was sooner than 6:00?

That's convicting. I can think of all kinds of people who I've just been too shy to share my faith with. The point isn't to create a big guilt trip and weigh you down with the eternal destiny of everyone you know. Each person bears their own responsibility for what they've done with Christ in their lives. The point is to live like Jesus meant what he said, and that soon means soon. Paul put it this way:

Ephesians 5:16

Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times!

I've been learning a lot lately about getting to the point and overcoming my fears of rejection or how people will react to whatever it is I have to say. I've had a whole series of intimidating conversations lately. And I've discovered that getting to the heart of the matter is usually what the other person is wanting anyway. If there's something that needs saying, don't wait. We have a limited window here. I don't want to live timidly or like there will always be more time to say what I know I need to say. There is urgency if Jesus is really coming back.

There is one more thing Jesus gives us by saying he's returning and that is **hope**. I would go so far as to say that nothing could be more hopeful than the idea of Christ coming to earth again. Listen to this description of what it will be like:

Rev 7:16-17

Never again will they hunger;

never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them,

nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;

he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Are you looking for something to fill you up? Do you come to church hoping to find something to feed your soul? Jesus promises an end to that hunger. Are you dry and thirsty and parched? Christ promises complete refreshment. Have you been beaten down and scorched by the heat of life? Christ offers protection and restoration. Has something been at the center of your life that doesn't truly care about you in return? Christ says he will be your center. Have you been hurting and crying? When he returns, the pain will end and the tears will dry. That's the kind of hope wrapped up in Jesus' return.

The hope is solid and sure because Jesus has promised it. He didn't say it might happen. He didn't hint or tease about it. He said he **WILL** come back.

Hebrews 10:37

For in just a very little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.

Are you needing hope this morning? Are you needing something sure that you can count on? Jesus offers it to those who ask for it. By saying "I Am coming soon" Jesus tells you you are not alone, you are not forgotten. There is a good and just God who has a plan. He's the great I Am. He's the king. And he's returning for us at any time.

A few weeks ago, when I was talking with Scott and Katy about this message series, they introduced me to a great song that I think is a fitting way to wrap up this morning and our entire I Am project, because it speaks to how who God is fits into our lives. They're going to come and sing it for us now, and as you listen, let it become your prayer to thank God for sending his Son, for being involved in our lives and for promising an eternal future with him for everyone who wants it.