

## God's in Charge (Perfect Storm Series)

There's a line that you seldom hear now without thinking, "Uh-oh, there's trouble in the punch-line." The line is "What were you thinking?" The usual answer is, "Ah, I wasn't."

Two 24-year olds invaded the property of an oil drilling company 75 miles east of Dallas, Texas in the wee hours of the morning this past January. Four oil/water storage units located on the property seemed to the trespassers to make ideal platforms for a 3 am cigarette break. Courageous firefighters managed to save their lives and the other three oil/water tanks. "What were you thinking?"

The East Alligator River in Northern Territory, Australia is crossed at Cahill's Crossing. Recently a Euro tourist drove into the parking lot of a boat launch upstream from the crossing and, assuming she had reached Cahill's Crossing, she gunned the engine of her rental vehicle and plunged down the boat launch into the alligator infested waters. She was quick to escape the vehicle and, before the alligators could give thanks for their food, she swam to shore. What was she thinking?

Wichita, Kansas - two brothers won \$75,000 with a winning lottery ticket -- but these guys aren't winners. They decided to celebrate the prize by spending a lot of money on meth and marijuana. One of the brothers went to the kitchen to refuel the butane torches they planned to use as lighters. The butane fumes eventually reached the pilot light of the furnace, which caused a large explosion. The one brother ended up in the emergency room at a local hospital and the other ended up in jail.

Men are especially prone to making these kinds of fatal or near-fatal errors, because of their tendency to want to impress women with their machismo. Witness Pierre Pumpille of Lyon, France, who recently shunted a stationary car two feet by head-butting it. "Women thought I was a god," he explained from his hospital bed. What kind of a god head-butts stationary cars down the street, I wonder? I can't see any of the women in this church being overly impressed by Monsieur Pumpille's exploits - what was he thinking?

And, more to the point, what were the Jewish leaders thinking would happen to them when the God who they so eagerly awaited actually arrived on the scene? As we talked about last week, they were anticipating the Day of Yahweh, the day when God would come to earth once more to redeem His people Israel and to bring judgment on Israel's enemies. But they would surely know the Scriptures that described the day of the Lord's coming -- not a pleasant prospect either for Israel's enemies or for the people of God. Some samples:

*What sorrow awaits you who say, "If only the day of the LORD were here!" You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light."*  
(Amos 5:18)

*Scream in terror, for the day of the LORD has arrived -- the time for the Almighty to destroy.* (Isaiah 13:6)

*For the terrible day is almost here -- the day of the LORD! It is a day of clouds and gloom, a day of despair for the nations. (Ezekiel 30:3)*

*Stand in silence in the presence of the Sovereign LORD, for the awesome day of the LORD's judgment is near. The LORD has prepared His people for a great slaughter and has chosen their executioners . . . That terrible day of the LORD is near. Swiftly it comes -- a day of bitter tears, a day when even strong men cry out. (Zephaniah 1:7,14)*

What were they thinking? Why would they welcome God's presence into their nation knowing what it would bring? Here's what I think was going on in the minds of the rulers of the Jews. They believed that they had been chosen by God to rule His people, to pass on His laws, to teach the people to obey His word and to urge them to be faithful to His commandments. They thought of themselves as the good guys and so I'm sure they thought that it would go well with them when God came to deliver His people.

If you've read the Narnia tales from the beginning you will remember a character known to the reader as Uncle Andrew. Uncle Andrew was an amateur magician and he had been dabbling in some forbidden magic when he stumbled on the secret of moving from one world to another completely different world. Being quite the coward, he doesn't go himself, but he tricks two children into going and they bring back with them Jadis, the Queen of Charn, a ruined city that she has destroyed through her own pride and cruelty. By the end of the story we know that she is the witch who features so prominently in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and who seeks to dominate the beautiful land of Narnia.

But before she ever arrives in Narnia, she visits Uncle Andrew in London. He is struck by her power and by her fierce beauty and he imagines himself to be her equal, someone that she will take seriously and admire. She does nothing of the sort, but in his vanity he can't see that she despises him and treats him as nothing more than her servant, there to do her bidding. He is so certain of his own importance, that he loses touch with reality.

This is not an analogy of the Jewish leaders, because in Jesus' coming they were confronted with someone really and truly good and wonderful, not cruel and petty as Jadis was. But the delusion is similar -- when you are pretty sure you are doing the right thing, on the right track, when God comes to bring correction, to put you on the right track, it can be a pretty uncomfortable confrontation. The Jewish religious leaders were very uncomfortable with Jesus, but not because they weren't expecting God to come -- only because they didn't think He would come like this.

There were other prophecies besides the ones I read to you earlier about the coming day of Yahweh. There were clear prophecies that said that the LORD had abandoned His temple -- Ezekiel saw it happen (chapters 10,11) -- but that He would return.

*The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple. (Malachi 3:1)*

*Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they*

*see the return of Yahweh to Zion. (Is. 52:8)*

In the years when Jesus was growing up there was a movement -- you could call it a political movement or a religious movement, or, as Josephus called it, a *philosophy* -- that said that now was the time for God alone to be king of His people.

They were fed up with their own kings. The century of the Maccabeans had been characterized by division, by feuds and by civil war. Now they had to deal with the second-rate sons of Herod -- and they hadn't been crazy about Herod, either. They didn't see any hope in the human kings they had been saddled with and the rising hope of Judaism at the beginning of the first century was that God would come and establish His kingdom, His rule. He would drive out the Romans, cleanse the temple and establish the long-awaited rule of justice and peace. Out of the years of crushing disappointment, this movement emerged saying that only God could be King. He was the only One fit to rule His people. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing towards the end of the first century, tells us of several strands of this movement, this *philosophy*, and there may have been many more.

The idea that God should be king was really a very old one. When the people of Israel, looking at the corruption of Samuel's sons, asked him to give them a king, Samuel was upset. God was their king; why would they want some human to rule over them? And when he asked God about it, he was told, "Do as they say, for it is Me they are rejecting, not you. They don't want Me to be their king any longer." (1 Samuel 8:7)

After Saul's failures as a king, David came to the throne, a man chosen by God because he was a "man after God's own heart." Listen to the promise God made to David:

*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. (2 Sam. 7:12-14)*

That prophecy partially referred to David's son, Solomon, who became king after him and who built the temple in Jerusalem. But it also points to a throne that would last "forever" and this prophecy was understood in Jesus' day as referring to the time when God would become king. Somehow, in the mind of the teachers of the day, God would come and establish His kingdom and it would be, in some sense, through David's line. Nobody seemed to know how that could happen, but they were expecting that that's what God would do.

In the meantime, the people sang the book of Psalms. On Sabbath and on feast days, the people sang words like these:

*God has gone up with a shout, YHWH with the sound of a trumpet.  
Sing praise to God, sing praises;  
Sing praises to our King, sing praises.*

*For God is the king of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm. (47:5-7)*

Or this, from Psalm 145:

*I will extol You, my God and King, and bless Your Name forever and ever . . .  
All your works shall give thanks to You, O YHWH,  
and all your faithful shall bless You.  
They shall speak of the glory of Your Kingdom, and tell of Your power,  
To make known to all people Your mighty deeds and the splendor of  
Your Kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
And Your dominion endures throughout all generations. (vv. 1, 10-13)*

God as king was a developing theme in Jesus' day and it always seemed to include these elements:

1. The celebration of God as King was especially done in Jerusalem, in His home in the temple.
2. When He is enthroned, the nations of the world are brought under His rule.
3. When God is King, there will be real justice, fairness, and all corruption and oppression will be removed.

We sometimes sing a song that the Jews would have sung many times ...

*How lovely on the mountains are the feet of Him  
Who brings good news, good news  
Announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness  
Our God reigns, our God reigns*

*You watchmen lift your voices joyfully as one  
Shout for your king, your King  
See eye to eye, the Lord restoring Zion  
Our God reigns, our God reigns (fr. Isaiah 52)*

There is so much more. The Scriptures that were read, that were sung, that were prayed, resonate with the language of kingship, and several of them include the idea of God ruling through His anointed Son, the heir to David's throne. One example is Psalm 2 which includes language that describes God installing His King on Mount Zion, or Jerusalem, words that describe this King as God's Son and also as His anointed One.

But what would this king look like? How were the people to know when God had come and how He had established His rule in Jerusalem? Which of the prophecies would He be representing in His coming -- the ones that underscore the Jewish expectations or the ones that overthrow them? Nobody knew. Nobody had any idea what the anointed one from Yahweh would look like. Some thought they could tell by his military victories over Rome. Most didn't have any answer for the question, "How will we know when He is among us?"

Although no one could paint a picture of what it would look like, there were two things that most Jews believed would characterize God coming to rule, two ways of describing His coming to Jerusalem: great power and great glory.

That's the scene that greeted the great hurricane from the south, Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, as He began to preach His message:

*"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.  
Repent and believe the good news."* (Mark 1:15)

And when Jesus sent out His disciples on their first mission trip, He told them to preach the kingdom of God -- "God is the King now" and to heal the sick.

"The Kingdom is among you, the rule and reign of God Himself has arrived, the expectation is fulfilled, God's in charge now!" But wasn't God always "in charge"? People today still talk about sovereignty as if it meant that God's will is always being done, but there are problems in this world that are not at all consistent with God reigning. The same was true in Jesus' day, of course. The Jews believed that God ruled from heaven, but they wanted Him to rule from among them, to take direct reign of the lives of His people. Their streets were occupied by unbelieving Romans, their leaders were corrupt, in cahoots with the Romans, the people were not prospering under the burden of heavy taxation. And in the midst of all this, there was sickness, there was death at the hands of these Romans and there were the inevitable family tragedies that made it look like God wasn't in charge. Into this, Jesus began to heal the sick, announcing that a turning of the tide had come, that God was beginning to take over and to reign in the way they had always hoped He would.

We know a few things from the gospels that point to the power of Jesus' message. One is that great crowds followed Him wherever He went. Great crowds don't follow a person who offers them nothing. Jesus was offering them hope, telling them that there was good news and He confirmed that sense of hope by healing those who were sick and by delivering those oppressed by evil spirits. In doing so, Jesus was awakening those long-held dreams of a new Exodus, of deliverance for God's chosen people, of God coming as King.

Jesus was a great communicator. He was raised on these same hopes, on this story of the Exodus. He knew what He was stirring in the hearts of the people as He told them that God's Kingdom had arrived and was even now among them. He also knew what it would mean to both the Romans and to the chief priests and teachers gathered in Jerusalem.

The Romans ruled through people whom they could control. They found people, like Herod the Great, who were loyal to their empire, and who could be relied on to do two things consistently: keep the peace and collect the taxes. Someone announcing the presence of a new Kingdom, or the return of an old one, would not be welcomed.

The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, were happy that Roman policy was to govern

through local, established systems of governing. That meant that they could keep their influence over the people and could continue to run the temple and the sacrifices and offerings that went on there. They also knew what their responsibility was for this deal: they had to maintain the peace. They were charged with the responsibility of seeing that no religious uprising threatened the *pax Romana*, the peace of Rome.

What were they thinking? Were they thinking that God's rule could come and not affect them? Did they think that the inbreaking of the Kingdom of Heaven would leave them in their positions, untouched by the powerful presence? Or did they simply find it convenient to dismiss Jesus as an enemy, try to keep Him out of the limelight and undermine His popular support? What were they thinking?

And what were they thinking as Jesus rode up that hill on the back of the donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 ... *"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Jesus had come bringing salvation -- He had forgiven the sins of many, much to the disgust of the religious leaders of the Jews. And now he was coming into Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey and the crowds were waving palm branches and spreading their cloaks on the ground in front of the donkey. "See, your king comes to you ... riding on a donkey." What were they thinking?