

Following The King, Whose Scepter Is A Towel

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Date: 25 February 1996

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[0 : 00] Two weeks ago, from Tuesday to Thursday, February 13 through 15, I had the privilege of participating in a truly historic event.

For two and a half days, I had the privilege of spending time with 40,000 pastors at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta. You heard me correctly, 40,000 pastors.

We were there for the Promise Keepers Clergy Conference for Men. It was the largest, most diverse gathering of pastors in world history.

40,000 of nearly every stripe of male disciple of Jesus in this land. Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Southern Baptists, General Conference Baptists, Reformed Baptists, Regular Baptists, Irregular Baptists, Evangelical Free, African Episcopal Methodist, Free Church, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Vineyard, Messianic Jews, and Adventists.

I traveled with the pastor of the Adventist Church on Vallejo Drive, Calvin Thompson. 40,000 of every stripe of racial background in the land.

[1 : 15] Anglos, Africans, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans. 500 Native American pastors gathered, the most that ever gathered anywhere at any time.

13 of whom had walked 168 miles to Atlanta. And they walked with the theme, we finally found someone who keeps his promise. 40,000 pastors called together by a football coach to affirm our unity in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, to confess our sins and seek his renewing grace, to once again be filled with his spirit, and to heed his call to let the walls come down.

To let the walls come down between denominations and races, so that together we could bear a winsome, contagious witness to Jesus as our peace in the land.

As you may know, this is just part of a larger movement which is literally spreading like wildfire. On the human level, it was started by Bill McCartney, former head coach of the University of Colorado football team.

In 1990, Bill sensed that God was calling him to call men to rise up and be the men of God we are called to be. He gathered some other 72 men together to pray about this.

[2 : 43] In 1991, a year later, they held a conference on the football field of the University of Colorado, and 4,000 men came. In 1992, another conference, 22,000 men came.

In 1993, another conference, 50,000 men came. In 1994, they held conferences in seven other cities, and 270,000 men came. In 1995, they held conferences in 13 other cities, and 760,000 other men came.

This year, they're going to hold conferences in 22 different cities, and it is expected that over 2 million men will come to seek the face of Jesus Christ and to commit to be like Him, a promise keeper.

The Los Angeles conference is going to be held at the Coliseum on April 19 and 20, and I'm calling every man in this church, 14 years and older and up, to do everything you can to try to be part of that conference.

Something happened in that event in Atlanta that will change the face of this nation. Tony Evans, a black man from Atlanta, called this event the Cosmic Bowl.

[3 : 58] And he called it the Cosmic Bowl because as those 40,000 pastors gathered there, we put the powers that seek to divide and destroy on notice that Jesus Christ the King is going to have His way.

You mark Valentine's Day 1996. Valentine's Day 1996 as the day that the revival in this land went into high gear.

I have ordered a video of this event, and I will make it available to you when it comes. I invite you now to turn to a text of Scripture which is at the heart of the Promise Keepers movement.

The text, as far as I know, has actually not been preached in any one of the conferences. It probably does need to be preached. But it is at the heart of this movement, and it seems to me it's at the heart of what the Holy Spirit is doing in our time.

The text is John chapter 13, verses 1 through 17. The event which John describes in this text takes place in an upper room somewhere in the city of Jerusalem on the night before Jesus went to His cross.

[5 : 10] And the event sets up what is called the upper room discourse, recorded in John 13 through 17. In the upper room discourse, Jesus begins to prepare His disciples to go on without His physical presence.

To go on in the absence of His physical presence. Not the absence of His presence, but the absence of His physical presence. For in the teaching that follows this event, Jesus promises that after He leaves, He will come again in the person of the Holy Spirit whom He will send to abide with and in them.

The event, the foot washing, is probably one of the most widely known events in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Would that it were more widely known because this event turns everything upside down.

What Jesus does and what Jesus says in this event causes a profound paradigm shift. A paradigm shift in the way we view human relationships and a paradigm shift in the way we understand what it means for anyone, including God, to be the King.

Now, in order to appreciate the magnitude of the shift in this event, we need to see the event in the flow of John's Gospel. At the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is given a number of titles.

[6 : 33] And as the Gospel unfolds, the meaning of those titles are unfolded. Jesus is called Son of Man, Lamb of God, Son of God. He calls Himself Bread of Life, Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, Resurrection and the Life.

And the meaning of each of these titles slowly but surely unfolds as the Gospel unfolds. Now, one title is particularly important for us understanding this event.

It is the title King. Nathanael, one of Jesus' first disciples in his first encounter with Jesus, says, Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.

Then later, after Jesus feeds the 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish, the crowds, says John, want to take Him by force and make Him the King. And then on the Sunday, before Jesus goes to the cross, on Palm Sunday, Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna to the King of Israel.

Hosanna means save now. Jesus, you are the King. Save us now. The poetry of the first century captures what the people on the streets were thinking when they called Jesus King.

[7 : 42] One of the poems, called Psalms of Solomon, says this, listen, Behold, O Lord, and raise up to them their King. Gird Him with strength, that He may shatter righteous rulers, that He may purge Jerusalem from nations that trample her down, that He may destroy the godless nations with the word of His mouth.

Hosanna to the King. The King has come to shatter, to smash, to purge. Then as Sunday gives way to Monday, and as Monday gives way to Tuesday, and Tuesday gives way to Wednesday, the crowds become increasingly disillusioned.

So does Judas, one of Jesus' disciples. Jesus is not fitting the mold. Jesus is not being the kind of king they expected Him to be. And then comes Thursday night.

And if you are able, I invite you to stand for the reading of God's word. Now, before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, and taking a towel, He girded Himself about.

[9 : 08] And then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. And so He comes to Simon Peter. Peter says to Him, Lord, do you wash my feet?

Jesus answered and said to him, What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter. Peter says to Him, Never shall you wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash

you, you have no part with me.

Simon Peter says to Him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus says to him, He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not all of you.

For He knew the one who was betraying Him. For this reason He said, Not all of you are clean. And so when He had washed their feet and taken His garments and reclined at table again, He said to them, Do you know what I have done to you?

You call Me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and teacher, washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you should do as I did to you.

[10:11] Truly I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, neither is the one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you enabled John to faithfully remember this event and the words.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would cause these words, familiar words, to come off the page and come alive in us as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen. You may be seated. Now, remember that the roads and streets of first century Palestine were plain dirt.

Plain dirt. Which means that they were in dry season inches deep in dust and in wet season they were liquid mud. And remember that shoes of that time were very simple.

Just a flat sole tied on the foot with some straps. Which meant that every time you walked in a street in Palestine your feet got dirty. Therefore, just inside the doorway of most homes you would find a basin of water and a towel.

[11:25] When you would come into that home a servant would greet the guests and then as an act of hospitality wash the feet of the guests. On that Thursday night when Jesus gathered His disciples together in the upper room none of them had bothered to do this act of hospitality.

It was a humble act and a humbling act no doubt. such a menial act that it was included in a list of tasks which Jewish slaves were not required to do.

The Jewish slaves did not have to do this. They would hire a Gentile slave to do this. It was certainly too humble an act for peers to do for one another. Luke tells us that as the disciples gathered together in the upper room they were engaged in a dispute about who would be the greatest in the kingdom which King Jesus was now inaugurating.

Their imaginations were on fire with dreams of thrones and power and glory in such a setting no one dare assume the role of a servant and carry out the menial task of washing one another's feet. No one that is except Jesus. King Jesus. Jesus rises from the table takes off His outer clothing and girds Himself with a towel and proceeds one by one to wash and dry His disciples' feet.

[12:50] Jesus is the king all right. It's just that He's not the kind of king the disciples and the crowds expected. He is the king whose scepter whose symbol of authority and power is a towel.

By Friday of that week the world will learn that this is the king who chooses a cross for his throne. At least four great truths are revealed in Jesus' use of the towel in the upper room.

Four great truths. First truth. The towel dramatizes the whole career of the king. That is washing His disciples' feet is no isolated event.

What Jesus does in the upper room that night simply dramatizes what He has been doing for His disciples all along. He has been serving them all along. He has been giving Himself away for them all along.

It goes deeper than that. Jesus' actions that night portray the whole of His career. They portray the whole of the king's journey from the Father to the world and back to the Father.

[14:02] Notice the verbs in verses 4, 5, and 12. The verbs. Jesus rose up, laid aside, took up, wrapped around, washed, wiped, and took up again.

Jesus rose up from the table just as He had risen from His eternal throne. Jesus laid aside His garments just as He had laid aside His privileges as Son of God in the heavenly realm.

Jesus wrapped a towel around Himself just as He had wrapped Himself with our humanity, with our flesh and blood. Jesus washed His disciples' feet, performing the lowest and most menial of tasks, just as the next day He died the most degrading death, the death of a common criminal.

And then when He had finished washing the disciples' feet, Jesus took up His garments again and returned to His seat of honor just as when He had finished saying, It is finished, He was taken up

from the grave and returned to His seat in heaven again.

Jesus' use of the towel dramatizes His whole career. Jesus' use of the towel is celebrated in a hymn which the early church loved to sing.

[15:16] And it's a hymn which the Apostle Paul includes in his letter to the Philippians. It's Philippians 2, 5 to 11 which we recited earlier. Let me recite it again. Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus who though He was in the form of God did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of but emptied Himself taking the form of a servant and being made in the likeness of human beings.

And being found in appearance as a man He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death even death on a cross and therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Captures that whole flow from the Father to the world and back to the Father. One of the songs our young people like to sing also captures that. You came from heaven to earth to show us the way from the earth to the cross our debt to pay from the cross to the grave from the grave to the sky Lord we lift your name on high.

Jesus' use of the towel that night dramatizes that whole journey rose up laid aside wrapped around washed and wiped and took up again.

Second truth the towel reveals the king's understanding of kingship that is the towel reveals Jesus' own understanding of what it means to be the divine king.

[16:47] From our human perspective washing feet is beneath the dignity of the king of glory. From our human perspective it's a great contradiction. I remember years ago preaching oh how incongruous for this one who has always been God from eternity.

What Jesus reveals that night is that this is not incongruous at all. That his actions are not a contradiction at all. He reveals that it is because he is king that he washes feet.

Notice in verse 3 that John wants to emphasize that Jesus knows who he is. This is so crucial to see. Jesus knows who he is in this scene. He knows that he comes from the father.

He knows that the father has placed everything at his feet. He is king of kings and lord of lords. He knows that he is going back to the father. He knows who he is and knowing who he is he rose up he laid aside and he wrapped around.

His actions are not a contradiction. His actions are a revelation of what it means to be the divine king. It is because he is king that he washes feet.

[17:57] Peter's horrified. He cries out never shall you wash my feet. The words have the same tone of protest that we hear in Peter at Caesarea Philippi.

Remember that? After Jesus had declared his must I must go to Jerusalem and die Peter exclaimed God forbid this shall never happen to you. Remember what Jesus did in that scene? He turned to Peter and said get behind me Satan because you do not have in your mind the things of God you have in your mind the things of man. Peter's still suffering from that in the upper room. In the upper room Peter wanted Jesus to fit into the human idea of kingship. He wanted Jesus to fit into the human idea of royalty. He wanted Jesus to fit into the human idea of divinity.

You the divine king will never wash my feet. Peter sees it as a contradiction. Kings do not wash feet. Yes they do if they understand Jesus the king.

[18:57] Jesus' use of the towel shatters our concept of divine royalty. Most of us live with this idea that to be God means to be high and exalted to be on a throne being served by willing servants.

In the upper room Jesus is revealing God's idea of divine royalty. I say God's idea because Jesus is only doing in the upper room what he has always seen his father do.

Throughout the gospel of John Jesus says I only say what I hear my father say I only do what I see my father do. In the foot washing event Jesus is living out his and his father's understanding of what it means to be king.

Being king being God means coming down and giving oneself away in service of his creatures. In the Philippian to him the him that I recited earlier the although should therefore be translated because not although he existed in the form of God he did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of but because he existed in the form of God he did not consider equality with God something to take advantage of but emptied himself taking the form of a servant.

To be God is to be servant to be king is to wash feet paradigm shift. Let me read for you a paragraph from Leslie Newbigin's comment on John 13 listen this is not just an acted lesson in humility Peter would have understood that the foot washing is a sign of that ultimate subversion of all human power and authority which took place when Jesus was crucified by the decision of the powers that rule this present age in that act the wisdom of this world was shown to be folly and the powers of this world were disarmed but flesh and blood ordinary human nature is in principle incapable of understanding this it is to the Jew a scandal to the Greek folly only those upon whom the risen Christ will come and give this Holy Spirit will know this folly is wisdom of God and the weakness is the power of God at that moment as the man he is

[21 : 15] Peter cannot understand this the natural man makes gods in his own image and the supreme God will be the one who stands at the summit of the chain of command how can a natural man recognize the supreme God in the stooping figure of a slave clad only in loin cloth you see the fact is Peter would have felt perfectly comfortable washing Jesus feet that would be normal but to have Jesus the great I am stoop down before him and take hold of his feet and begin to wash them this is not normal this is not normal says Peter yes it is says Jesus Jesus is revealing that such a posture such a spirit such an act is all together normal for the true and living divine king remember the word that Jesus spoke to his disciples just before they came to Jerusalem Mark 10 45 for even the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many in that one line

Jesus turns everything upside down even the son of man in the vision that God gives the prophet Daniel the son of man is the one to whom all the kingdoms of the world are given the son of man is the one to whom all the kings must bow the son of man is the one before whom all will worship and all are to serve even the son of man did not come to be served but to serve the eternal king king above all kings lives to serve for him being king means being servant this king serves his subjects how are you reacting right now to all of this to this paradigm shift if you are like me you have mixed emotions on the one hand it's thrilling on the other hand that's very disturbing it's disturbing because it would seem that to have a view of a God who serves us would nurture pride it seems that if I lived with a view of God as servant that I would become even more self-centered than I am but the fact of the matter is the exact opposite occurs a God on his knees humbles us a God who comes to wash our feet makes us more

God conscious you see if we view God as king as the one who is at the top of the ladder at the summit of the chain of command the one who is on the top rung of the ladder we actually become very self-preoccupied when we have that view of God we are always wondering how I stand relative to God am I making it up the ladder okay am I doing alright am I am I am I but not with a God who comes to us at our feet not with a God who kneels before us to wash our feet we cannot but become preoccupied with such a God such humility takes us off the throne and shifts us out of the center Lord you shall never wash my feet well then Peter you have no part with me Jesus was helping Peter understand that we only meet the living God at the bottom rung of the ladder we can't meet him anywhere else he isn't anywhere else to be divine king is to be servant third truth the towel points to the king's saving action on our behalf

Jesus' action that night points to his death on the cross how do I know that well for one thing John tells us that Jesus' hour had come and in the gospel of John the hour refers to that time of death for another John tells us of the betrayal of Judas and that betrayal of Judas now draws this foot washing into the crucifixion and John says that Jesus laid aside and took up laid aside and took up those are two verbs that Jesus uses earlier in the gospel of John to describe his death John 10 verses 17 to 18 I lay down my life that I may take it up again no one takes it from me but I lay it down on my own initiative I have authority to lay it down I have authority to take it up again lay down take up those verbs tie the foot washing to the crucifixion I think this helps us then understand this interaction between Peter and Jesus Peter says never shall you wash my feet Jesus then says well then if I do not wash your feet you have no part with me it is as if

Jesus were saying this Peter if you do not let me be who I am if you will not allow me to be the kind of king I am if you will not allow me to stoop down before you and act on your behalf to cleanse you you have no fellowship with me you have no part in my kingdom Peter something needs to be done to you and for you by me and unless I do it you have no part in me that something is the cross only the ultimate act of service only the ultimate act of stooping down can cleanse us from sin unless the son of God lays down his life for us we remain in the filth and dirt of our sin and shame unless the

son of God comes off the throne we have no hope as Saint Augustine once put it proud man would have died had not the lowly God found him we need the lowly God Peter seems to grasp this for just a moment and the thought of missing out on what Jesus might give him causes him to exclaim well if you must wash my feet then not only my feet but my hands and my head also

[26 : 49] Peter is typical just go to the other extreme Jesus clarifies a person needs only to have his feet washed but is completely clean if he's already had a bath you see during that time whenever someone came to a special meal he or she would make sure to have taken a bath before they went which means as they walked the dusty or muddy roads all they needed now was a foot washing washing Peter's feet pointed to the cross Peter you do not need to be perfect to have a part with me you only need me to wash your feet to lay my life down for you my death for you is all that you need to enter the kingdom nothing more can be nor need be added to this Jesus is declaring that by his death we are cleansed by his death we are washed by his death we are made worthy of the kingdom fourth truth the towel now marks those who let the king serve them say that again the towel will now mark those who have let the king serve them using a towel will now distinguish those who know and follow this servant king after washing their feet

Jesus says to the disciples listen carefully to what Jesus says verse 12 do you understand what I have done to you you call me teacher and lord and rightly so for so I am if I then your lord and teacher wash your feet you ought also wash one another's feet as you may know some Christian communities actually take this command literally and hold foot washing services usually the Thursday of Holy Week but remember what this event means this event points beyond the foot washing it's a Jesus way of saying I lay my life down for you the intent of this act is fulfilled after the act listen to Jesus words very carefully I'm going to say them again it's a paradigm shift if I your lord wash your feet you ought also wash one another's feet now what we would expect to hear is this since I your lord have washed your feet you ought to also wash my feet right since I have washed your feet you will now wash my feet but he did not say that if he had said that the disciples would have fought for the privilege of being first to do it they would have rushed to find that basin and towel they had overlooked before right

I would have I would have done anything to wash his feet I envy that woman that Luke tells us about who out of deep gratitude washed Jesus' feet with her tears and then wiped the feet with her hair I envy Mary Martha's sister who washed Jesus' feet with perfume and then dried them with her hair I would do anything to wash the Savior's feet I would do anything to be able to touch the feet of the king of kings I would run to get that towel I owe him so much I owe him everything and I long to pour my gratitude and my affection upon his feet but he did not say wash my feet he said you ought also wash one another's feet what is this I'm going to quote Leslie Newbegin again because of all the commentators Newbegin sees the paradigm shift in Jesus' words he writes Jesus has laid aside his life for us all and the debt which we owe to him is to be discharged by our subjection to our neighbor in loving service and here's the line our neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what we owe to the master

I'm going to say that again our neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what we owe the master throughout this week after my experience at Atlanta in particular I owe him even more I found myself saying Jesus I just want to pour out all my affection and all my love and all my gratitude upon you and I kept seeing him say wash one another's feet my neighbor the person next to me is now the appointed agent authorized to receive what I owe Jesus paradigm shift huge proportion this says that Sharon my wife is the appointed agent authorized to receive what I want to give Jesus I lay my life down for Jesus by laying my life down for her I wash Jesus feet by washing her feet David and Christy and Marissa and Alex my children are the appointed agents authorized to receive what I owe the king

I wash his feet by washing their feet my parents and my in-laws are the appointed agents authorized to receive what I owe Jesus I wash his fourth the people for Jesus I wash I wash his feet by washing their feet to receive what you owe the Master.

[32 : 27] You wash His feet by washing my feet. Turn to someone and say, this is incredible. Can you imagine what was going on in the minds of the disciples in the upper room that night?

What is He saying to us? We tend to idealize those folks, don't we? We tend to treat them as already arrived saints. But they were not. They're just as self-centered as you and I can be. They were just as different from one another as we are. Peter, James, John, Nathaniel, Matthew, Simon, Judas, all with different approaches to life and all with different agendas for one another.

If I, your Lord, have washed your feet, you ought also wash mine. No, He didn't say that. You ought to wash one another's feet. As I was reflecting on this during the week, I saw Matthew, the tax collector, and Simon, the zealot, look at each other across from the table.

What? What is this? Matthew, conservative, protector of the status quo. He made money off of his countrymen by charging taxes to raise money for the foreign oppressor.

[33 : 39] Simon, liberal, revolutionary, committed to driving the Romans out at any price. Both of them called into fellowship with Jesus. Both of them have had their feet washed by Jesus.

Matthew, the tax collector, is now the appointed agent authorized to receive what Simon, the zealot, wants to give the master. And Simon, the zealot, is now the appointed agent authorized to receive what Matthew, the tax collector, wants to give the master.

This turns the world upside down. It subverts the normal way we relate. It destabilizes human society and does so to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God.

You who do not like, you who do not like the classic traditional hymns, listen to me, those who do like them are the appointed agents authorized by the king to receive what you owe him.

You wash Jesus' feet by washing theirs. You who do not like the contemporary repetitive choruses, hear me, those who do like them are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe the master.

[35 : 07] You wash Jesus' feet by washing theirs. You who want everything done decently and in order, those who find that restricting are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe the master.

You who want to throw off the structure altogether, those who find that chaos producing are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe the master.

Paradigm shift. Let me say it to the larger church. Speak now beyond the walls. Presbyterians, hear the word of the king.

Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, who name my name are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe me. You wash my feet by washing theirs. Independents, hear the word of the king.

Mainliners, who name my name are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe me. You wash my feet by washing theirs. It goes wider than that.

[36 : 31] Anglos, Anglos, hear the word of the king. African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Easterners who name my name are the appointed agents authorized to receive what you owe me.

You wash my feet by washing theirs. African Americans, probably the most wounded group in America, hear the word of the king.

Anglos, who have hurt you, and Hispanics, and Asians, and Middle Easterners who name my name are the agents appointed and authorized to receive what you owe me.

You wash my feet by washing theirs. If I, your Lord, wash your feet, you ought also wash my feet. No, he didn't say that. He said, you ought also wash one another's feet. Brothers and sisters, we belong to a king whose scepter is a towel.

[37 : 42] The towel dramatizes his whole career. The towel reveals his understanding of kingship. The towel points to his saving action on our behalf, and the towel now marks those who have experienced his grace.

When, therefore, I am not able or not willing to take up the towel, it means only one thing. It means that it has been some time since I've allowed the king to be king.

It means that now is the time to let him be the kind of king he is. Because when we humble ourselves before him and allow him to serve us, we are freed from our egocentricity and we discover that all the love we wanted to pour on him is to be poured on one another.

It changes the world. It changes the world.

It changes the world when you know what kind of king he is. It changes the world when you know what kind of king he is. It changes the world when you know what kind of king he is.