

# Palm Sunday

*Notes Prepared by Rev. Kevin Sneed*

## **Introduction:**

The Sunday before Resurrection Sunday or Easter is often called Palm Sunday. It's also referred to as the "triumphal entry." This marks the beginning of "holy week," a series of significant events described in scripture leading us to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. On Palm Sunday, we can see that Jesus was both celebrated and misunderstood. Many celebrated Jesus coming into Jerusalem, but most did not really understand the purpose of his arrival. Let us examine this scene from the journey of Jesus to the cross so that we can better understand the purpose of his coming and then celebrate with greater understanding and appreciation.

**The Text: Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44 and John 12:12-19**

## **How Jesus Enters Jerusalem:**

The account of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey is one of the few stories included in each of the four Gospels. This event must have been quite rememberable for the disciples accompanying Jesus. In fact, the gospels seem to be pushing us to get to this point. Mark especially writes with haste to get us to "holy week." All the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Finally, on Palm Sunday, Jesus enters the city where the Gospels writes have been trying to take us.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and his followers shared this journey with many Jews who were making their way to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate the Passover. This was a very significant religious event for Jews and as many as could traveled to Jerusalem to commemorate God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Acts 2 tells us that Jews were present at Pentecost from 14 different nations. The same would have been true for Passover. It was an annual pilgrimage attracting many. As Passover neared, Jerusalem would swell with visitors. During the time of Jesus, the Roman governor and his soldiers would also travel in from Caesarea to take up residence in order to oversee the crowds and prevent any unlawful activity.

When entering into Jerusalem, it was a tradition for Jewish pilgrims to walk into the city as a symbol of humility and respect. Even if someone traveled a great distance on an animal, these worshippers would dismount in order to enter Jerusalem on foot, as was the custom. Jesus did the opposite. Mark 10 indicates that Jesus had been traveling by foot but chose to finish the journey on a donkey. In fact, this is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus is described as riding on an animal.

Jesus of Nazareth had now become a notable person. He was certainly popular in Galilee and Northern Israel but he was indeed known in Jerusalem as well. The news of his miracles and teaching had spread. His disciples already understood and proclaimed that he was the Messiah and many others were hoping it was true. As Jesus entered the city, those who looked forward to his arrival met him with shouts of Hosanna (from Hebrew meaning "save us"). In a gesture of honor, they laid their garments along with palm leaves down on the road for his donkey to walk upon (rather than the dirty, dusty road). While riding a donkey over leaves and jackets may not seem that exciting or desirable to us, in the Jewish context this was the royal treatment – a red-carpet arrival. In Psalm 118:27 we see that palm leaves were used in great processions, especially those connected to the coming of the Lord. King Solomon rode into his coronation ceremony in Jerusalem on a mule in 1 Kings 1:44. When Jehu was pronounced King in 2 Kings 9:13, the people offered their garments to cover the road where Jehu traveled. Indeed, some of those following Jesus would have preferred to see him ride into

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<sup>1</sup> John describes at least three trips that Jesus made to Jerusalem but the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not include all those trips in their writings.

Jerusalem on a warhorse with an army but they were glad to see him riding into Jerusalem in the style of great kings of the past.

### **Why Jesus Enters Jerusalem:**

The gospel writers point out that this was a fulfillment of prophecy given in Zechariah 9:9. We can see that this is also a fulfillment of Genesis 49:8-11. However, fulfilling prophecy was most likely of secondary concern to Jesus. Prophecy is not a set of demands that must be fulfilled in the future. Prophecy is expressing the will and mind of God, whether present or future. This prophecy was not a mandate for Jesus. Jesus did not look back into the prophets to see what he must do. Rather, the prophets saw (by the grace of God) those things that Jesus would do. The prophet Zechariah foresaw what Jesus himself would decide to do. Thus, riding the donkey into Jerusalem was not an obligation from the prophet, it was the determination of Jesus. Jesus determined to do this. William Lane writes, "Jesus himself took the initiative in preparing for his entry into the city."<sup>2</sup>

Why? Why would Jesus, who was the greatest example of humility, intentionally enter Jerusalem in this exalted way? We know it wasn't to boost his ego or flaunt his status. Jesus repeatedly told people to NOT disclose who he was. I think there were two primary reasons for Jesus to make this decision. First, it was to confirm to his followers and those residing in Jerusalem that he was the prophesied King and Messiah. His arrival into Jerusalem, especially this particular trip, was significant since his actions identified him as the promised Messiah and promised king from the line of David.

Second, it was a foreshadowing of the glory that would be experienced on the other side of the week ahead. Jesus knew what he was going into. This was not just a Passover pilgrimage. This was a journey to the cross. Yet before all the suffering started, here was a moment of glory for Jesus and his followers to enjoy. They were excited. Mark tells us that Bartimaeus, who had been healed from blindness, was in the crowd. Most likely he was sharing his marvelous testimony and pointing people to Christ. John tells us that those who saw Lazarus raised from death were in the crowd telling the story of this amazing event. Perhaps it was these men, with their savior riding triumphantly into Jerusalem for many to see, who led in the praise cheering "Hosanna!" It was a glorious moment and the perfect way to start a holy week. They were celebrating the coming of Jesus.

Later, however, in the midst of betrayal, trials, torture, and death the disciples and followers of Jesus may have been tempted to look at their situation and say, "this is not a holy week, and perhaps he is not the Messiah." Yet before they had the opportunity to doubt, God provided them with reason to believe. The image of Jesus riding into Jerusalem with glory and praise while fulfilling scripture perhaps stirred or strengthened the faith of those who watched. Unfortunately, in John 12:16, John recalled that the disciples really did not understand what Jesus was doing. It was only in hindsight that they were able to put everything together. However, they did not have to wait until the crisis was over on Easter Sunday to find reason to believe and trust God. Confirmation and reason to trust in Jesus had been given on Palm Sunday.

### **What Happens to Jesus in Jerusalem:**

The glory and celebration of Palm Sunday did not endure. In fact, Jesus rides his donkey all the way to the Jerusalem temple where he begins to point out and drive out corruption in the temple courts. This further angered the religious leaders. In the very Temple of God, they mad and accelerated their plans to kill the Son of God. They ultimately acted upon those plans by arresting Jesus on the Thursday evening after Palm Sunday.

From Palm Sunday to Resurrection morning, Jesus and the disciples found themselves in both a holy week and a tumultuous crisis. Jesus took up the cross while the disciples scattered and despaired. While they gladly followed Jesus as he rode triumphant on a donkey, they failed to follow as he carried a cross. They were pleased to walk alongside him down the avenues of palm leaves and soft garments yet were scarce by his side down the path of tears and blood. The disciples were happy to stand with Jesus when the crowds used their

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<sup>2</sup> William L. Lane, *The NICNT: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 393.

hands to applaud and worship Jesus. They fell away, however, when the mod's hands were used to beat and crucify Jesus.

### **Apply the Text:**

As we see in Holy Week, walking with Jesus will include many days that resemble Palm Sunday but also many days that resemble Good Friday. We would do well not to squander the days of glory but find in them strength for the days of hardship ahead. During the difficult days, fragile faith and weak trust may not endure. Suffering may cause us to waver in our belief. Fear, doubt, and temptation may increase alongside troubles. Let us remember, God has given us reason to believe. Surly, we can recall even recent moments of glory where God was powerfully made known. Don't allow a recent glorious testimony to be diminished by this present crisis. We don't have to wait until the crisis is over to praise and trust God. We can do it even now based on what he has already accomplished and shown us.

As the disciples entered holy week, Jesus knew they would be tested along with him. Perhaps Palm Sunday was designed to help them see the rest of the week with right perspective. As they saw Jesus struggling up the path to calvary with a cross on his back, they would have done well to remember his glorious entry and then view his present suffering through the lens of their prophesied king riding gloriously into Jerusalem for that very purpose. The journey to the cross was a necessary extension of the procession started on Palm Sunday, not a negation of it.

The lens of faith is the lens through which God intends for us to see the world. We do not look through rose-colored glasses. We do not deny the reality of the suffering. We put it into the proper perspective. Likewise, we should view any crisis through the lens of the victory that Jesus won this week against sin and death. The victory of Jesus gives us a confidence to trust in God even in spite of what we see because victorious Jesus is still visible in the center of it all.

### **Conclusion:**

This red-carpet experience was uncharacteristic for Jesus. Jesus shunned the spotlight and even instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (see Mark 8:29-30 for an example). Perhaps his disciples were a little surprised when Jesus told them to fetch a donkey, but they did not put up any protest. Perhaps they were glad and excited to do this task and facilitate the exalted and triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – he was the Messiah after all and it was time everyone knew it! Previously, when Jesus mentioned going to Jerusalem, he did not mention red carpets. He only spoke of suffering, betrayal, and death (Mark 8:32-33; Mark 10:32-34; Matthew 16:21; Matthew 20:17-19; Luke 18:31-33). Peter even rebuked Jesus for speaking in such a way in Matthew 16:33 and Mark 8:33. Putting Jesus on a donkey rather than a cross was certainly a welcomed discussion. Perhaps if they had responded to his call to pick up the cross as well as they did his call to find the donkey, they wouldn't have scattered so easily when the persecution began. It's easy to obey the Lord when his commands align with our desires. Its when his Word and our will diverge that we find the difficulty in following the Lord. In a way, we would put him on a donkey that we would lead around so that we could ensure that our desired outcomes come to pass. In reality, many people do see Christianity simply as a vehicle to take them where they want to go. It's a means to their own desired end. Jesus, however, has come to us not to be a vehicle but a driver. He's not a tool we wield but a commander we obey. His mission is to not facilitate our desires. Our desire should be to carry out his mission even when (especially when) it diverges from the red carpet path and on to the way of suffering.

As mentioned earlier, Psalm 118 is closely connected to Palm Sunday and the arrival of Jesus, Son of God and Messiah. I encourage you to read it and consider if we have the same excitement regarding our interactions with Jesus. Let us always be overwhelmed with praise for the Messiah who came to save us. Even if we see trouble and hardship, we can be encouraged by what God has already done for us. We always have a reason to rejoice, especially when we consider Christ's coming into our world and into our hearts.