

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”
Matthew 21:1-11 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ “Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” ¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” ¹¹ And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

- Matthew 21:1-11

Introduction: The Weirdness of Palm Sunday

Sometimes we can become so familiar with something that we forget how weird it is. Do you realize that many people in our country think eating crabs is weird? Have you ever stopped yourself in the middle of picking a crab and thought, “This is really weird! Who was the guy who first thought of eating these things?”?

Palm Sunday is weird. Think about it: Every other time we see crowds of people acclaiming Jesus as king in the Gospels, He sneaks off and escapes their adulation. Jesus was never interested in being acclaimed king by the crowds. He would often intentionally avoid the crowds and seek time alone. He sometimes said really hard things, like in John 6, which we’ll be looking at after Easter, seemingly intended to thin out the crowds, to drive the masses away. Yet here on “Palm Sunday,” as we’ve come to call it, we see Jesus intentionally arranging a public processional into the city of Jerusalem, welcoming the adoration and acclamation of the crowds. This is definitely weird! So, what is going on?

A. The Sovereign Lord, vv. 1-3

Well, the first thing we notice in Matthew 21 is that Jesus is entirely in control of this somewhat

chaotic, noisy and exuberant scene. Jesus and His disciples are on their way to Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus had come to Passover several times before, but He knows this time is different. We learn from John's Gospel that Jesus has just recently raised Lazarus from the dead and that this very public and dramatic miracle has raised expectations about Jesus to a fever pitch.

Jesus and His disciples have likely spent the previous day, the Sabbath day and night, at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha in Bethany, where Mary had broken her alabaster jar of ointment and anointed Jesus' feet with the expensive oil of nard. As Judas protested over the waste of money, his greedy heart was becoming more and more fixated on money, and Jesus had spoken of His coming burial.

Now, as Jesus and the disciples come to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, they can see across the Kidron River Valley into Jerusalem. Jesus knows what is coming for Him, and He arranges all of the details perfectly. He sends two disciples into the neighboring village, where they immediately find a young donkey colt with its mother. He tells them to take this donkey and his mother and bring them to Him. Now that's really weird! Why would Jesus tell these disciples to go and take someone else's animals, someone they don't even know?

Well, somehow (and we're not told how), Jesus has arranged everything. He tells them that if anyone asks them what they are doing, they are to say, "The Lord needs them." This is so mysterious and we're not told any of the back story to explain it. Has Jesus pre-arranged with the owners or does He just "know" that they will be willing to let Him use their animals? We simply are not told. But at the very least, it is clear that Jesus is not asking His disciples to commit the first-century equivalent of Grand Theft Auto; He is borrowing these animals and He has permission to do so, somehow.

Sometimes strange and unexpected things come into our lives. We find ourselves in unusual circumstances that we could not foresee. But we should remember at these times that nothing ever takes God by surprise. We can trust that He is working all things according to His good will, even when we can't see how or why.

B. The Sovereign Word, vv. 4-5

Matthew explains to us why Jesus is sending for a donkey. It's not that He can't just walk across the Kidron Valley. He has walked this valley before. In fact, this is the only time in the Gospels we ever read of Jesus riding on an animal. He may have done so at other times, but we are not told. Jesus is also not doing this just to either appease the crowds or to dissuade the crowds from their enthusiasm. Instead, Jesus is fulfilling the word of the prophet Zechariah. He is doing everything according to the plan of His Father.

Zechariah had prophesied of the coming Messiah King, saying,

*"Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold, your king is coming to you,*

*humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”*

Now, why did God foretell this and what was the purpose of having Jesus ride into Jerusalem in this way? Well, many people have observed that kings would ride into a city on a white war stallion if they were coming as a conqueror but on a donkey if they were coming in peace to make peace. That's accurate, but perhaps a bit overly simplistic. Kings almost always rode on horses. What's even more remarkable is that Zechariah prophesied that the king would come to Zion riding on the foal of a beast of burden. Normally, kings did not ride beasts of burden, pack animals.

So, Jesus comes riding in this way to communicate two things: humility and peace. The prophecy is a challenge to the expectations of the people, who wanted a mighty king to lead an army and overthrow the Romans. Jesus came in humility and in peace. The original verse in Zechariah calls the people of Zion to rejoice and tells them that the king on the donkey is victorious and righteous. Jesus is coming to win a victory as the Righteous One, but the victory is not what the people expect. It is what they need and not necessarily what they want.

C. The Obedient Disciples, vv. 6-7

So, we see Jesus acting in obedience to the word of His Father, and then we see the disciples acting in obedience to the word of their Master. We don't see these two unnamed disciples arguing with Jesus, questioning Jesus, hesitating at the word of Jesus. What Jesus is asking them to do is unusual, unexpected and somewhat dangerous. Walking off with someone else's animals was a big deal. Yet these disciples obey.

How often do we over-think things instead of having the simple and obedient faith that would hear the word of Jesus and obey? Not only do these disciples obey Jesus, but when they bring the animals, they put their cloaks on them so Jesus can ride the donkey more comfortably.

Now many Bible critics have ridiculed Matthew at this point. They have pointed out that the other Gospels don't mention two donkeys and they wonder how in the world Jesus was supposed to have ridden two animals at the same time. Well, we don't need to assume that Matthew was so foolish as to tell us that Jesus rode two animals simultaneously. William Hendrickson suggests in his commentary that the best way to understand "He sat on them" at the end of verse 7 is as a reference to the outer garments on the donkey's back.

A young donkey who was old enough to start to be ridden but who had never been ridden before would be skittish and scared and would be easier to handle and ride if kept with its mother. Even laying cloaks over the young donkey would be easier if you laid them on the mom first, so the young donkey

could see what you were doing and why. All of this makes sense if we understand the natural behavior of these animals, which I'm sure Matthew understood far better than modern Bible critics.

D. The Celebrating Yet Confused Crowd, vv. 8-9

The crowds now see Jesus coming and they join the disciples in honoring Him by spreading their cloaks on the ground for Jesus to walk on. Some people also started to cut down tree branches for Jesus to walk on. It's John who tells us in John 12:13 that these were palm branches. The palm tree and the palm branch were symbols of national independence for the Jewish people, so that's probably part of what they have in mind when they're doing this. They're acclaiming Jesus as their king and hoping that He will indeed be the king of an independent Israel.

There are apparently two main crowds here: The ones following Jesus from Bethany and Bethphage across the Kidron Valley and the ones who are coming out from Jerusalem. These crowds shout out: *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"*

The words the crowds are shouting are partly drawn from Psalm 118, which is the last of Hallel psalms, psalms of joyful praise commonly sung at Passover. Passover was the celebration of national deliverance, almost like a Jewish Fourth of July celebration with a heavily religious emphasis, a mixture of religious zeal and intense nationalistic patriotism. It's no wonder that the Passover celebration made the Roman occupiers nervous.

Psalm 118 is the most Messianic of the Hallel psalms, and verses 19-26 say

*Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.*

*This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

*I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.*

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.*

*This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

*This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

Save us, we pray, O LORD!

O LORD, we pray, give us success!

*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.*

When I preached this psalm this past summer, we saw how perfectly suited to the Triumphal entry it was.

1. Hosanna to the Son of David!

The first thing the crowds shout is “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Hosanna means “save now” and is a reflection of Psalm 118:25, “Save us, we pray, O Lord!” and so it is a combination of an expression of praise and a petition for salvation. All of Psalm 118 is marked by a combination of praise to God and petition for salvation, which would come through the triumph of the Messianic king.

The Jewish people wanted salvation from the oppression of Rome, and they were acclaiming Jesus as the Son of David, the long-awaited Messiah who would deliver them from the Romans. Jesus was not the first messianic hope to be so acclaimed by the crowds in Jerusalem and He would not be the last. But this was the one time the crowds were right, though they did not know how right they were.

They were right to praise Jesus and they were right to expect that He was and is the One who brings salvation and deliverance through His victory over the enemies of God and God’s people. They were right, but they profoundly misunderstood the nature of their bondage and their true enemies. Thus they would miss the answer to the Hosanna they rightly cried.

2. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!

The crowds then say, “*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*” This is the direct quote from Psalm 118, verse 26, which says, “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.*” The crowd coming out of Jerusalem likely stretched all the way to the Temple and was probably coming out of the Temple, so this is a great and accurate picture of what is happening here in the Triumphal Entry.

Once again, the crowds are right and yet mistaken in what they shout. They think Jesus comes in the name of the Lord as One who has been sent to them by God, and He has. But they miss that He alone comes into Jerusalem in the name of the Lord as the One who is the Lord. Jesus has highlighted this for His disciples when He told them to tell the donkeys’ owners that “The Lord needs them” – not “Jesus needs them” or “Our master needs them,” but simply and powerfully, “The Lord needs them.” Jesus comes in the name of the Lord as the Lord Himself, coming to His people.

E. The Unique Prophet, vv. 10-11

The people in the crowd following Jesus across the valley know who He is, but many coming out of Jerusalem don't know who He is. They are confused, as many members of a mob often are. So Matthew tells us that *"when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."*

1. The Prophet-King

Everything about the procession and the acclamation of the crowd has been hailing Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah-King, Son of David. Yet when the people in the city crowd want to know who He is, He is identified as "the prophet Jesus," which is exactly what He was. He is the Prophet-King. David himself was both a prophet and king, and Jesus as the Son of David has both of these offices, too.

As the prophet Jesus, He reveals the truth of God to the people of God. He speaks the very words of God. Of course, Jesus does so in a unique and superior way to all other prophets. He speaks the word of God as the word of God incarnate. So He is the Son of David who is superior to David, David's Son and yet David's Lord.

2. The Priest and Sacrifice

But Jesus doesn't just come into Jerusalem as the prophet who speaks the word of God and the king who would bring victory of God, He also comes as the priest of God to offer Himself as the sacrifice of God. We've seen that the crowd's shouts were drawn from verses 25-26 of Psalm 118.

Well, verse 27 says

*"The LORD is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!"*

We know that Jesus is the light of God, who has come to shine upon us. He is also the priest who binds the festal sacrifice to the horns of the altar and He is Himself the festal sacrifice. The festal sacrifice, or festival sacrifice, at Passover is the Passover Lamb. Jesus comes as the light, the high priest and the Passover lamb.

The coming of Jesus as prophet, king, priest and sacrifice is all brought together by the writer of Hebrews in the majestic opening of that book:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

– Hebrews 1:1-4, ESV

This is the One we worship on this Palm Sunday.

Conclusion: Are We Singing the Right Hosanna?

But we need to ask ourselves a vital question as we worship Him: Are we singing the right Hosanna? Are we looking to Jesus to save us from all sorts of lesser problems and petty enemies, clearing the obstacles and making our lives safe and comfortable, or are we looking to Him to save us from our sins?

We can come to Jesus as Messiah-King in one of two different ways:

1. We can come claiming our own righteousness as a merit badge and implore Him to deliver us from our problems and give us a good life. This was the mindset of the crowds, and Jesus' failure to meet their expectations would turn their cries from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify!" in less than a week.
2. We can come to Jesus deeply aware of our sin, our bondage, our unworthiness and our deep lack of righteousness and we can cry "Hosanna!" asking Him to save us from our sin, from ourselves, and to give us His righteousness and His victory.

Which way will we sing "Hosanna!" this week?