

## READING PALMS

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### **Matt 21:1-10**

*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!"*

*When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"*

This morning is the day designated on the Christian calendar as Palm Sunday. It is called that in light of the palm branches people waved as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

It's a strange picture when you think about it. Last year I talked about the donkey Jesus rode, and when you envision him sitting on a little wobbly colt that had never carried anyone before, you can see why it wouldn't look that impressive. He rides into town in this parade-like scenario, goes to the temple and makes a ruckus, and that is the end of it.

It just seems quirky or bizarre, or at the very least misguided, given what's coming next. What could we possibly learn about Jesus in this unusual setting? Apparently, it must be important, because all 4 of the gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – included a retelling of the event. All four make mention of Jesus riding on the donkey and what the crowd was saying.

All four do that, but I like Matthew's version, because no one does a better job than Matthew when it comes to connecting the dots for us. The writer of Matthew loved to point out the ways in which what Jesus did related to Old Testament prophecies. All through the book, he takes us back to things that had been said hundreds of years earlier that found their true fulfillment in Jesus.

One place that he points us to in this story is Psalm 118. I think if we spend some time reflecting on Psalm 118, we can better understand the significance of what happened on that first Palm Sunday. Then we can all become palm readers – not people who look at hands, but people who can see the palm branches in this story and understand what they were all about.

**Psalm 118:19-29**

*Open for me the gates of righteousness;  
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.*

*This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.  
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;  
you have become my salvation.  
The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;  
the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

*O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.  
From the house of the LORD we bless you.  
The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us.  
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.  
You are my God, and I will give you thanks;  
you are my God, and I will exalt you.  
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his love endures forever.*

This is a great Psalm, and we're only looking at a portion of it. Here is what Martin Luther had to say about this Psalm:

*This is my Psalm, my chosen Psalm. I love them all; I love all holy Scripture, which is my consolation and my life. But this Psalm is nearest my heart, and I have a peculiar right to call it mine. It has saved me from many a pressing danger, from which no emperor, kings, sages nor saints could have saved me. It is my friend.*

It's a truly incredible passage. It is one of many Psalms that are considered Messianic. God had promised the Jewish people a Messiah – someone who would come and rescue them. And some of the Psalms talk about that. Usually the Messiah is talked about like a king figure in these Psalms whose words and character look forward to the words and

character of Christ. And sometimes it is uncanny to see how direct the applications really are.

So what does it have to do with Palm Sunday? When you just hear it read, you might miss the parallels. So let me map some of them out.

### **1. An entrance.**

Matthew tells us about Jesus entering Jerusalem. Psalm 118 tells us about a king who was also entering Jerusalem.

### **2. “Hosanna!”**

It’s easy to find in Matthew. In the Psalm, it’s the phrase translated “O Lord, save us.” It comes from the same Hebrew word – hoshia-na – that Matthew uses. The Psalm bounces back and forth between the congregation and the leader reading.

### **3. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”**

That’s the easy connection. That is the line that first clues us in to what Matthew is doing.

### **4. Tree boughs.**

Matthew mentions the palm branches specifically, and the psalmist talks about having boughs in hand in the procession.

### **5. The Temple.**

Jesus goes straight to the temple in Matthew, which is where the crowd in Psalm 118 was also going.

### **6. “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.”**

This one may be cheating, since we didn’t read it in Matthew earlier. But just a little ways further in the chapter, Matthew tells us that Jesus quoted this line to the Pharisees in the temple.

Those are some immediate connections. I’m sure a more extensive study could find even more. The point is, the resemblance is not accidental. The readers of Matthew are supposed to have Psalm 118 in mind.

So why is that? What do we learn about Jesus when we look at his actions at the triumphal entry in light of Psalm 118?

The first thing that struck me was that this helps showcase

## **The AUTHORITY of Jesus.**

When Jesus told his disciples to get the donkey, it was to be in keeping with another passage – one in Zechariah that Matthew quoted:

*"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.'"*

He wanted people to be thinking of him as a king. Jesus knew he was coming to Jerusalem to die. He had told his disciples on more than one occasion why he was making the trip. It wasn't a secret that he would be killed. But Jesus wanted it known that he was not a victim. He was riding into town as a king. He was in charge. Nobody else was going to set the terms.

I've sometimes looked at the crowd in the Palm Sunday story and thought, "How sad. They didn't get who he really was. They're all excited but they've missed the boat and think he's going to become a regular king."

That's probably true. They didn't understand Jesus' intentions. But we have to remember that Jesus is the one who painted the picture. He's the one who ordered the donkey, knowing full well what the symbolism meant.

It wasn't a mistake at all. He was king. And he wasn't just reacting to his circumstances – He was proactively participating and showing that no one else was making the decision for him.

During the Revolutionary War, the Americans were having a difficult time getting good intelligence about what was going on with the British. So General Washington asked the commander of one particular regiment to find a volunteer to act as a spy.

There was a young man in that regiment named Nathan Hale. He was just 21 years old, but he was wanting to make a more significant contribution to the war effort and thought being a spy would be just the ticket. One of his friends, Captain William Hull, tried to talk him out of it, saying he was too honest to be a spy and he'd never be able to lie to save his own skin like he would need to.

But Hale wanted to try it anyway, saying he knew what would happen if he got caught. And sure enough, he got caught. And when asked what he was doing, he told his captors the truth – that he was on a secret mission for General Washington. Not a particularly good tactic for a spy. So he was sentenced to be executed. But before he was hanged, Hale uttered his famous line: "My only regret is that I have but one life to lose for my country."

He didn't deny who he was or what he was about and he didn't flinch at the consequences. That's a bit like how Christ entered Jerusalem – knowing what the results would be, but refusing to flinch or apologize for who he was.

Jesus had faced many enemies in his life, but death was the ultimate. Paul calls death “The last enemy to be destroyed.” And Jesus never blinked in the fight. He remained the king.

### **1 Corinthians 15:54-55**

*Then the saying will come true:  
Death swallowed by triumphant Life!  
Who got the last word, oh, Death?  
Oh, Death, who's afraid of you now?*

If Jesus' authority supersedes our greatest enemy, then that means his authority is over all our smaller enemies as well. There is nothing that we face that is too much for him. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

That really leads us to the second thing that Palm Sunday shows us, which is

### **The VICTORY of Jesus.**

Based on the context clues in Psalm 118, scholars believe it was written to celebrate a win in a battle.

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

*The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us.  
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.*

In other words, it was written in light of the fight being over.

The way the crowd is acting in Matthew is also a celebration, as if Jesus were coming home from a battle. It's like a victory parade. People were cheering, waving palm branches as if they were flags and getting caught up in the excitement.

The only thing was – the battle was still to be fought. Jesus still had to go to the cross.

But the victory was assured. God had already decided the outcome. That verse, “This is the day the Lord has made” could equally be translated “This is the day the Lord has acted.” It was a done deal even before it took place.

Jesus could have been a king just putting on a brave face going into battle. Remember in the war with Iraq how the Iraqi leaders would get on their national TV and say “Things are going great! We're going to win!” even when the hotel they were broadcasting from was surrounded by tanks? That was living in denial.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a well-founded confidence going into the fight. It was appropriate to celebrate victory ahead of time.

I was talking with someone this week who is facing an incredible crisis with no visible means of a solution. Her husband abandoned her with a huge pile of debt and she doesn't have a job. But I've never heard someone with so much assurance that God would take care of her. She was fully confident that things would be okay.

It wasn't because she just didn't understand how serious her situation is. It wasn't a false sense of hope. In fact it was just the opposite. Her confidence was based on knowing who God is and how he has always provided for her. Even though it is going to be hard and painful at times, she still could keep her eyes on that ultimate victory, knowing God would take care of her.

### **Psalm 56:11**

*Fearless now, I trust in God; what can mere mortals do to me?*

I once saw a movie where the final showdown between the main characters came with a fight on top of a moving train. The hero was losing, he had nothing but his bare hands and the bad guy was standing over him about ready to shoot him. Then the good guy starts smiling, and we soon learn why. It's because he's looking past the bad guy at the tunnel the train is going into, and he knows that because his enemy is standing up he's going to be knocked off the train from behind.

We look past our immediate enemy and see what's coming. Evil will not win. It will be destroyed. We can smile and celebrate now, even before the victory, because the victory is sure.

This Palm Sunday event highlights not only the authority and victory of Jesus, but also

### **The QUALITY of Jesus**

What kind of king is he? Not the kind you'd usually expect. Matthew tells us he was gentle. His way of waging war was far different from other kings.

When we think of someone having a messiah complex, how do we define it? Usually it is someone with an enormous ego who has to be the center of attention. Ironically, it's the exact opposite of the true messiah's character. Jesus almost always did a 180 of what you would expect the Son of God to do.

It was right before this story that the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked him to let them sit on either side of him when he became king. And Jesus said, "You have no idea what you're talking about. In my kingdom, being first comes by being last. Being great comes by being a servant – not having servants."

That's such a radical concept that it surprises us even when we know that's true of Christ. But that's the only kind of messiah that can reach us. If he's a typical king, he's unapproachable. A king on a donkey, though – that's different. He doesn't even own the donkey – he borrows it. That's the kind of king who values relationships over possessions. The kind who says he will touch the untouchable, who will be gracious with us when we deserve to be smacked, who will value us when we've lost any sense of worth.

Jesus even goes so far as to make sure the people who lend him the donkey know they will get it back. When we give up something for Christ, it's hardly a sacrifice, because he promises we'll get back even more.

### **Mark 10:29-30**

*"I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age...and in the age to come, eternal life."*

With the authority that he has Christ would have every right to come storming in and trample all over everyone. But as this passage points out, the quality of his kingship is very different.

One final concept that Palm Sunday and Psalm 118 show us is

### **The CENTRALITY of Jesus.**

I already mentioned that Jesus was the stone the builders rejected. But the psalmist goes on to say that that stone became the capstone.

One of the ways that word could be interpreted is as the keystone in an arch.

I like the image of the arch in this context, because the passage is talking about entering the gate of the Lord. If you don't have the keystone at the top of the entrance, you don't have an entrance. All the stones would fall in on each other.

When I've built with Legos, I've sometimes built a tower, using the bricks around the outside and leaving a hollow in the middle where you can hide people. But sometimes I've forgotten to put in a door, so you have to reach down through the top to get anything inside.

If a fortress is going to be any good at all, it needs a way in so you can take refuge in it. Without a gate, you can't get in. You just have this massive wall that keeps people out. Without a keystone, you have no gate.

In the book of John, Jesus said

**John 10:9**

*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*

Jesus is the centerpiece. He's the keystone to Christianity. Without him, all we're left with is nothing but a religious system that is like a wall to keep people out.

The psalmist writes about God,

*I will give you thanks, for you answered me;  
you have become my salvation.*

Do you know what the Hebrew word for salvation is? yeshua – the same Hebrew word for the name Jesus. He didn't just buy our salvation – He IS our salvation. He didn't just open the gate – He is the gate.

In Psalm 118 the focal point of the celebration was the altar, or the place where the sacrifices were made. That's where the whole parade was headed.

In just a few minutes, we will be celebrating the Lord's supper, and it is our focal point, because we remember in it the sacrifice of Jesus that is at the core of our faith.

As we prepare to take it this morning, let's reflect on how Palm Sunday affects our understanding of Christ and what that means for our lives.

Ask yourself these questions:

What is my fight right now? If Jesus took death head on and won, can I trust that he has authority over my toughest enemies? If he is stronger than death, is he stronger than my anger? If he's got authority over death, does he have authority over my bad habits? Over my annoyance with that person at school or work?

Can I see the tunnel behind the bad guy? Can I shift my focus so that I'm living in light of the final outcome? Can I claim victory and live confidently in the knowledge of who God is?

What is he asking me to use? Do I have some type of donkey that he wants me to let go of for a while? Can I trust that he'll make it up to me? Am I willing to part with it? I had one night this week when I really needed to spend some time prepping for this morning, and I found myself fighting it. I wanted that time for me. No particular reason. I didn't have any plans. I just didn't want to let go of the rope. And I thought to myself, this is exactly what this story is talking about. Do I really take Jesus at his word that he'll give me my time back?

Palm Sunday shows us that Jesus is the king who isn't afraid of anything and who loves us enough to let us share in his victory. Let's be part of the parade that celebrates him today.

