
Kingdom Paradox

Matthew 21:1-17

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Introduction

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week in many Christian religions. Holy week begins the week before Easter and the last week of Lent. Other names for the celebration are Passion Sunday, Sunday of the Passion, Yew Sunday, Branch Sunday, and Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. Palm Sunday commemorates the triumphal entrance of Christ into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-9), when palm branches were placed in His path, before His arrest on Holy Thursday and His Crucifixion on Good Friday. It thus marks the beginning of Holy Week, the final week of Lent, and the week in which Christians celebrate the mystery of their salvation through Christ's Death and His Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The History of Palm Sunday

Beginning in the fourth century in Jerusalem, Palm Sunday was marked by a procession of the faithful carrying palm branches, representing the Jews who celebrated Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. In the early centuries, the procession began on the Mount of the Ascension and proceeded to the Church of the Holy Cross.

As the practice spread throughout the Christian world by the ninth century, the procession would begin in each church with the blessing of palms, proceed outside the church, and then return to the church for the reading of the Passion according to the Gospel of Matthew. The faithful would continue to hold the palms during the reading of the Passion. In this way, they would recall that many of the same people who greeted Christ with shouts of joy on Palm Sunday would call for His Death on Good Friday—a powerful reminder of our own weakness and the sinfulness that causes us to reject Christ.

Palm Sunday Without Palms?

In different parts of the Christian world, particularly where palms were historically hard to obtain, branches of other bushes and trees were used, including olive, box elder, spruce, and various willows. Perhaps best known is the Slavic custom of using pussy willows, which are among the earliest of plants to bud out in the spring.

The faithful have traditionally decorated their houses with the palms from Palm Sunday, and, in many countries, a custom developed of weaving the palms into crosses that were placed on home altars or other places of prayer. Since the palms have been blessed, they should not simply be discarded; rather, the faithful return them to their local parish in the weeks before Lent, to be burned and used as the ashes for Ash Wednesday. (<https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-palm-sunday>)

Since the days of the early church Palm Sunday has been an important day of celebration in the life of the church, but does the average church goer truly understand the significance of Christ's final

journey into Jerusalem? How can the event surrounding Palm Sunday be a paradox? And what is a paradox?

This is what Webster's says. Definition of paradox:

A tenet contrary to received opinion

A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true

A self-contradictory statement that at first seems true

An argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises

One (such as a person, situation, or action) having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases

The ancient Greeks understood a paradox can take us outside our usual way of thinking. They combined the prefix para- ("beyond" or "outside of") with the verb dokein ("to think"), forming paradoxos, an adjective meaning "contrary to expectation." Latin speakers picked up the word and used it to create their noun paradoxum, which English speakers borrowed during the 1500's to create paradox.

You know the story of Palm Sunday and Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but do know why Matthew constructed his story the way he did? What were the important parts of Matthew's story that he wanted us to see? Let's look together at Jesus final journey to Jerusalem as see what truth unfolds before us...

The beginning of the end (Matthew 21:1-17)

Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem when he leaves Galilee and makes his way through the Jordan River valley, teaching along the way as crowds follow him on his journey. This was likely not his regular route to Jerusalem, but the crowds still followed as he made his way to Jericho and eventually Bethphage and to the Mount of Olives. Bethphage was about 1.5 miles from Jerusalem, and the overall climb out of Jericho to Jerusalem is about 3,500 feet of climb over roughly 14 miles. If you have ever climbed Mt. LeConte in the Smoky Mountains that is also about a 3,000-foot elevation gain. So, the journey from Jericho to Jerusalem from was not an easy walk. It is at Bethphage where Jesus sends two disciples to fulfill old covenant prophecy.

Turn in your bibles to Matthew 21. Let's read verses 1-3.

An important errand (v. 1-3)

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem, he sends two disciples on an important errand. Bethphage was at the foot of the Mount of Olives and Jesus sends the two disciples into the village to bring to Jesus a

specific donkey tied up with her colt. He even explains to them to tell anyone who questions what they are doing that the Lord needs them. The word Lord here is typically used for YHWY, or God. We don't know if Jesus had already arranged for these animals to be available or if he simply knew they were available. Or perhaps he knew the owner of the beasts, and the Lord had sent a message to have them prepared ahead of time. Either way Matthew explains that this action took place to fulfill old covenant prophecy.

Old covenant prophecy (v. 4-5)

Matthew interprets verses 4 and 5 so that the reader knows exactly what is going to take place. Look at verses four and five.

This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, 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.'"

Matthew's use of the prophets here seems to also be a composite of Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9. The context of Zechariah is about God's coming judgment on the enemies of Israel, and the context of Isaiah 62:11 suggests God's eschatological redemption of his Holy People. Zechariah 9:9-10 reads, *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* And Isaiah 62:11, *Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."*

Matthew no doubt wants to emphasize Jesus' divine authority over the ownership of anyone's property at any point in time, but the additional emphasis here is that Israel is called upon to rejoice, for this means salvation is at hand. But it seems that Jesus must have chosen this act to cause a scene and draw attention to this entrance, since there is no other recording in scripture of Jesus riding on a donkey. This was apparently done to demonstrate the coming of the Messiah King, but not exactly as the crowd had imagined.

Old Covenant prophecy fulfilled (v. 6-7)

The context in Zechariah is of the Messiah coming in peace, but this is obviously lost on the crowds who seem to be looking only for a triumphant, militaristic, nationalistic King. However, Jesus enters Jerusalem peacefully and humbly on a donkey, and that same peace and humility would describe his journey all the way to his death on the cross. This would end up not being the messianic king they were hoping for and expecting. This will become increasingly apparent as Jesus continues his journey to the cross.

The disciples did as Jesus directed and brought the donkey and put their cloaks on its back and Jesus sat on them prepared to ride into Jerusalem. The crowds who were with Jesus put their cloaks on the ground in front of him as he began his journey into the Kidron Valley and the climb up into Jerusalem. In Jesus' day the trip into Jerusalem would have passed through the olive groves and

gardens of the Mount of Olives before heading into the Kidron Valley and into up into Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives was a place of retreat from many who lived in Jerusalem, and the Garden of Gethsemane was also at the foot of The Mount of Olives. Please look at verses six and seven.

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

Jesus sat on the donkey and made his way to Jerusalem through the Golden Gate, which was on the Eastern side of Jerusalem and was the main entrance into the Temple area. This gave Jesus direct access to the courtyards of the Temple from the Kidron Valley. According to Jewish tradition the Messiah would enter Jerusalem from the East, from that very entrance.

A time for celebration (v. 9-11)

The crowds that were with Jesus and his disciples recognized Jesus' act of getting on the donkey as very important. They become excited and begin praising Jesus as the one coming to save God's people. They begin shouting parts of Psalm 118 in worship to God. Verses 9-11:

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!" And 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."

Crowds went before Jesus and placed their cloaks and tree branches on the ground in his path. They were shouting and celebrating saying, "Hosanna to the son of David, and Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!" Now the whole City (an estimated 35,000-70,000 mainly Jews), became stirred up and became aware of Jesus' entrance into the city. They were cheering "Hosanna", which comes from Psalm 118:25-26 and literally means "Save us, LORD".

Psalm 118 is a declaration of confidence in the Lord's salvation, made in a time of need. The psalm was part of a longer hymn (called the Hallel) that was sung on great occasions... At the point in the worship when this verse was read, the people would wave branches of myrtle, willow, and palm. Branches may have been waved at other times also as a general expression of jubilation.

The crowd welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with the cry of "Hosanna" (Mt 21:9; Mk 11:9-10; Jn 12:13), followed by a proclamation, "Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD" (Ps. 118:26, RSV). This means the crowd was greeting Jesus as Messiah. Already before Jesus' time the phrase "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" was taken to refer to the Messiah. And it is possible that the word "Hosanna" by itself had messianic significance... All of these have messianic overtones. (Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). In Tyndale Bible dictionary (pp. 613-614). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.)

Psalm 118 begins *Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!* It's amazing to think that the people that followed Jesus were identifying Jesus as God, and the savior of his people by referring to this great Psalm. But what did the people really think?

Despite the celebration, Matthew notes the people identify Jesus as the prophet Jesus from Nazareth. Matthew gives us a hint, that although the people know that there is something special about Jesus, and they give acclaim with Messianic shouts and cheers. Because of the people had already made their mind up as to what the Messiah's coming would look like, they missed the reality of the meaning of Jesus' final journey into Jerusalem. In fact, Matthew tells us that Jesus had already told the disciples three times that he was going to be crucified and that he had to rise from the dead, and yet they still didn't understand.

Jesus Cleanses the Temple (v. 12-17)

When Jesus enters Jerusalem he arrives in the Temple courtyard, he immediately begins overturning the moneychangers' tables and driving out all who bought and sold in the temple court. Let's look verses 12-17:

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

The temple courtyard was also called the Court of the Gentiles. The Court of the Gentiles in the Temple was where pilgrims and gentiles would come and prepare for temple worship, but unless they were Jewish, they could not go into the true Temple in the middle of the courtyard. This was a huge open space of some 33 acres, the size of my in-law's farm just down the road from the Chapel. There were money changers in the Temple courts and in the porticos surrounding the courtyard.

The word "moneychanger" means money-banker or money-broker. They would make large profits at the expense of the pilgrims and foreigners. Every Israelite, rich or poor, who had reached the age of twenty was obligated to pay a half shekel as an offering to Jehovah into the sacred treasury. This tribute was to be paid in the exact Hebrew half shekel.

At Passover everyone who was an adult male, Jew, or Gentile, who wished to worship at the Temple would bring his "offering" or purchase a sacrificial animal at the Temple court. Since there was no acceptance of foreign money with any foreign image, the money changers would sell "Temple coinage" at a very high rate of exchange and assess a fixed charge for their services. The judges, who sat to inspect the offerings that were brought by the pilgrims, were quick to detect any blemish in them. This was expensive for the wealthy pilgrims, not to say how ruinous this was for the poor who could only offer their turtledoves and pigeons. There was no defense for them or court of appeal, seeing that the priestly authorities took a large percentage on every transaction. Over time this whole industry got out of hand, and worship and prayer were pushed out by commercialism. (a large part of this information came from Bible-History.com)

The Court of the Gentiles was not in the original design of the Tabernacle, and the Jewish leaders even posted warning signs in the Temple courtyard that stated any foreigner that tried to enter the inner sanctuary would be put to death. In Aaron's day Gentiles were permitted to pray and sacrifice to God in the same way the Israelites did. Numbers 15:14-16 says, *For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.*" Is it any wonder why Jesus begins at the court to upset the current order of temple worship in Jerusalem? Jesus was making it clear that the temple was no longer fulfilling the purpose for which it was built.

When Jesus does begin his aggressive attack on the moneychangers and sacrifice sellers, he references Isaiah 56:7. Consider verses 6-8 of Isaiah 56. *"And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."*

The ending of Isaiah 56 is a strong rebuke of Israel's irresponsible leaders. It's easy to see how both images are a part of Christ's actions in the temple courts.

So here is Christ riding in on a donkey through the Eastern gate of Jerusalem, thus fulfilling old covenant prophecy and then immediately entering the Court of the Gentiles and proclaiming Isaiah 56, which is about salvation for the Gentiles and exposing Israel's irresponsible leaders. Jesus accuses the leaders of transforming the temple into a den of thieves, or more literally, a den of terrorists.

Here the Messiah was purifying the temple in preparation for the great day of the Lord.

Wonderful Things (v. 14-17)

While Jesus was still in the temple courtyard, the lame and the blind came to him, and the chief priests, of course, were watching everything that was going on. It's interesting that Matthew used the language that the chief priests and scribes saw the extremely good and remarkable things that Jesus did. Let's read verses 14-17:

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?" And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

Jesus heals the lame and the blind and chief priest and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, the same things he had done many times before in front of the chief Jewish leaders, but this

time was different. There were children crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!", which again comes from Psalm 118:25, which is meant for God's personal praise, perhaps even with messianic intent. The chief priests and scribes were furious! They asked Jesus if he heard what the children were saying, and Jesus responded yes! Or...Of course! Then Matthew also uses Psalm 8:2, *Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.* All of Psalm 8 proclaims the majesty of the name of the Lord, and creation and dominion being in the hands of God. A majestic hymn of praise to the excellence of God. Therefore, Jesus is proclaiming himself to be God.

Psalm 8:1-2 *O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.*

Eventually Jesus leaves the temple and travels back down through the Kidron Valley and past the Mount of Olives and Bethphage to lodge at Bethany for the night.

So, there is the story of Palm Sunday as we celebrate it, but what is Matthew trying to tell the reader?

What is really going on?

Matthew uses the Old Testament texts in relation to the actual events in Jesus final journey to Jerusalem to paint a picture of the direction, understanding and reality of the kingdom paradox. Zachariah 9 paints the picture of the messiah coming to save his people humble and riding on a donkey but coming in power and salvation. This begins with the simple act of retrieving the donkey and the foal and riding into Jerusalem as the people expect the messiah to arrive. This caused shouts and celebration among the people who are looking for the messiah to return and restore Israel to a powerful earthly nation. Matthew uses Psalm 118 to show that the crowds were proclaiming success and blessings from the Lord, but Matthew perhaps recognizes the hesitance in the crowd that goes before Jesus, and in the end the crowd views Jesus as a prophet from Nazareth.

As Jesus enters Jerusalem and proceeds into the temple court, he begins to turn the tables, not only on the money changers, but also on the people's understanding of his mission of salvation. Jesus focuses on cleansing the temple for the benefit of the foreigners who have come to worship. Matthew uses Isaiah 56, which describes salvation for gentiles who join themselves to the Lord, and therefore, Matthew condemns the actions of the Jewish leadership and the temple worship that has made it difficult for gentiles to worship in the temple. This takes place as Jesus turns the money changers tables over and drives them out of the temple referencing Isaiah 56. It is the Jewish leaders that Jesus has set himself against, not the gentiles. The Jews had separated themselves from the gentiles and made it difficult, if not impossible for them to worship God in the temple. This type of separation between Jew and Gentile was never intended nor prescribed in the Old Testament scripture. Much of Ephesians makes important use of the historical imagery of the very real division between Jew and Gentile in Jesus' day.

Matthew bookends the adult crowds at the beginning of Jesus' triumphal entry with babes and infants praising the name of the Lord from Psalm 8 and Psalm 118 at the end of Jesus' triumphal entry. Jesus is healing the lame and blind in the temple, but now it is no longer the crowd of adults praising God for Jesus' entry, but children. The shift that Matthew shows is a change of the adult's praise of Jesus to the children. The silence of the adults is deafening. Apparently, the crowds are taken back by Jesus' actions in the Temple Courtyard. The focus on the end of the story much like previous stories in Matthew, it is the faith of the children that ends up catching our focus. Perhaps it is the simple faith of the children who understand what Jesus is doing, welcoming the cleansing of the temple, and accepting the gentile's faith, or seeing Jesus as God. In contrast, it is the chief priests who see the "wonderful things" Jesus is doing and are indignant. Child-like faith is required to see salvation clearly.

The kingdom paradox is that the kingdom is not what the people expected, and certainly not what the Jewish leaders wanted. Jesus was against their rule and authority and against what they had done to the gentile worship in the temple. The Jewish leaders had turned Temple worship into a den of terrorists. Salvation is equal access for all people, but only those with the faith of a child can see the truth of salvation for what it is.

Reflect and Respond

How do we apply the truths surrounding Jesus final entry into Jerusalem? There are two ways you might respond to this story.

One, you can try to dictate what your relationship with Christ looks like. This is what the initial crowd was doing. It appears that even the disciples were doing this earlier in the book of Matthew. Both tried to dictate to Jesus what they thought his life and the plan of salvation should look like. The initial crowds stopped following Jesus after they figured out he wasn't doing what they wanted or expected him to do. They simply faded into the background, until it comes time to crucify him, when they emerge again demanding his crucifixion.

Or two, you can have the simple, believing faith of a child. Simply and with contentment praise God daily for who he is in your life and all he does for you through his great salvation! Do you know Christ for who he is, not for who you want him to be? After Matthew's account of Jesus final entry into Jerusalem is complete, it is the children and those who seem to understand and have the faith to see Jesus for who he truly is.

It's not always easy to see the reality of life in God's kingdom. God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts. Childlike faith is simple, but not easy. God has this amazing plan of salvation that simply requires hearing and believing. Yet many want to add to it, or take from it, or make it difficult to understand. The crowds thought they knew who the savior was, the chief priests believed they knew the way of salvation, but ultimately Jesus gave a glimpse into his plan of salvation for both Jew and Gentile. And in the end, it wasn't the religious leaders or the adult crowd who understood who Jesus was, but it was the children. Is your faith simple and child-like? Do you seek and worship God like a child? Let me encourage you to remember the truth about our

celebration of Palm Sunday and remember the paradox or upside-down nature of God's kingdom. Believing is simple but not always easy.