

# The King Comes *on a Donkey*

*Palm Sunday — The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem*

“*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.”*

ZECHARIAH 9:9 · WRITTEN C. 520 BC — FULFILLED THIS DAY

## THE SCENE

### Jerusalem on the Edge

Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of a city that has swollen to bursting. Scholars estimate that Jerusalem's ordinary population of roughly 80,000 to 100,000 souls expanded to somewhere between 2 and 3 million during Passover — pilgrims who had walked for days or weeks from Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Rome, all converging on one hilltop city to fulfil the ancient command: *appear before the LORD*.

The streets were narrow, the air thick with incense, roasting meat, and animal dung. The Temple Mount rose white and gleaming — Herod's Great Temple was one of the largest religious

complexes in the ancient world, its outer courts stretching across 35 acres of cut stone. Roman soldiers watched from the towers of the Antonia Fortress, which abutted the north wall of the Temple, scanning the crowds with professional anxiety. Passover was the most politically dangerous time of year. Messianic rumours always ran hot at Passover. One spark could ignite a revolt.

Into this city — into this exact moment — Jesus of Nazareth chose to ride.

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

MATTHEW 21:10

The question the city asked was not rhetorical. Matthew distinguishes between two groups: *the crowds* — mostly Galilean pilgrims who had travelled with Jesus from Jericho — and *the city*, Jerusalem's own residents, who looked out from doorways and rooftops in bewildered alarm. The Galileans knew exactly who this was. Jerusalem was less certain, and that uncertainty would become lethal before the week was over.

## HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

# What Every Pilgrim Knew That Morning



### THE PASSOVER LAMB LAW

Exodus 12:3 commanded that every household *select* its Passover lamb on the 10th of Nisan — exactly four days before the sacrifice. The lamb was to live in the home, examined daily for any



### THE DONKEY'S MEANING

Kings of Israel rode horses only to war. A donkey signalled a king arriving in *shalom* — in peace. David's son Solomon was publicly proclaimed king by being placed on David's mule (1 Kings 1:33). The crowd



### PALM BRANCHES

Palms were a symbol of Jewish national triumph. They appear on coins of the Maccabean revolt, and were waved when Simon Maccabeus liberated Jerusalem from the Seleucids in 141 BC (1 Maccabees 13:51).

blemish, before being  
slaughtered at twilight on  
Nisan 14.

would have known this  
symbol instantly.

Waving palms at Jesus was a  
profound political statement.



#### HOSANNA!

The crowd's cry was not a  
worship song — not originally.  
*Hoshi'a na* in Hebrew means  
"Save now!" It comes from  
Psalm 118:25, a pilgrimage  
psalm traditionally sung as  
worshippers approached the  
Temple. It was a desperate,  
urgent prayer, not a polite  
greeting.



#### ROMAN TENSION

The Roman prefect Pontius  
Pilate normally based himself  
at Caesarea Maritima, but he  
rode to Jerusalem at every  
major festival with additional  
troops. Josephus records that  
Pilate had a brutal history of  
crushing unrest. The soldiers  
watching this procession were  
calculating whether to  
intervene.



#### DANIEL'S 70 WEEKS

Many scholars, drawing on Sir  
Robert Anderson's  
calculations, note that Daniel  
9:25 prophesied exactly 483  
years (69 "weeks" of years)  
from the decree to restore  
Jerusalem to the appearance of  
Messiah the Prince — pointing  
to this very week.

## PROPHECY FULFILLED

# Written in Advance

The Triumphal Entry was not improvised. Every element had been written down, in some cases five centuries before Jesus was born. The specificity is staggering.

#### THE PROPHECY

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion... behold,  
your king is coming to you, humble and mounted  
on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

ZECHARIAH 9:9 · C. 520 BC

#### THE FULFILMENT

*"They brought the donkey and the colt... and he  
sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks  
on the road, and others cut branches from the  
trees."*

MATTHEW 21:7-8 · NISAN 10

## THE PROPHECY

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes."

PSALM 118:22–23 · DAVID · C. 1000 BC

## THE FULFILMENT

The crowds sang from this exact psalm as Jesus entered — "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" — the same song used to welcome him they would kill.

MATTHEW 21:9 · CITING PSALM 118:26

Notice something extraordinary: the pilgrims were quoting a psalm about *rejection* while welcoming someone. Psalm 118 moves from desperate plea to triumphant procession to cornerstone. They were, unknowingly, singing the full arc of what was about to happen to the man they were welcoming.

## THE DAY ITSELF

# A Timeline of Nisan 10

DAWN

## Preparation in Bethany

Bethany

Jesus spent the previous night at Bethany, the village about 2 miles east of Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives, at the home of Mary, Martha, and the recently-raised Lazarus. Word had spread about Lazarus's resurrection — crowds had come specifically to see both Jesus *and* the man who had been dead (John 12:9). The chief priests were already plotting to kill Lazarus as well, because his existence was converting people to faith in Jesus.

MORNIN

## The Colt is Sent For

Bethphage

Jesus sent two disciples ahead with astonishing specific instructions: they would find a donkey *tethered*, with a colt that had *never been ridden*, in a village where, if challenged, they were to say only, "The Lord has need of it." All three details fulfilled prophetic requirements: an unriden animal was considered appropriate for sacred use (cf. Numbers 19:2, 1 Samuel 6:7). The owner released the animals without question — either by prior arrangement, or by divine prompting.

MID

## The Procession Begins

MORNING  
The Jericho Road

The crowd that had gathered in Bethany — those who had witnessed or heard about Lazarus — began to swell the procession. John tells us they specifically *testified* as they walked, telling others what they had seen (John 12:17). This was not spontaneous. These were people with a story,

turning a road into a witness march. By the time the procession crested the Mount of Olives, it had become something neither the pilgrims nor the Romans had planned for.

## APPROACHING

Mount of Olives

### Jesus Weeps over Jerusalem

At the crest of the Mount of Olives, where the full panorama of Jerusalem suddenly appears — the white marble of the Temple blazing in morning sun — something deeply human and deeply divine happened. Luke alone records that Jesus *wept*. Not wept quietly. The Greek word *eklauien* means to sob aloud, to wail. In the midst of his own royal procession, surrounded by a crowd singing his praises, Jesus broke down in grief over the city that would not receive him. "*If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes.*" (Luke 19:42)

## NOON

Jerusalem Gates

### The City is Stirred

Matthew uses the word *eseisthē* — the city was *shaken*, the same word used for earthquake. This is not a polite welcoming committee. It is civic upheaval. The Pharisees complained to one another, "Look — the world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). They were not exaggerating rhetorically. From their vantage point, something was genuinely spinning out of control.

## AFTERNOON

The Temple

### Jesus Surveys the Temple and Departs

Mark's Gospel provides a detail the others skip: Jesus entered the Temple, *looked around at everything*, and then — because it was already late — returned to Bethany with the Twelve (Mark 11:11). He would return the next day, Monday, to act. But today, Nisan 10, he surveyed what he would soon cleanse. This quiet, deliberate observation is the action of a man who has come not impulsively but on a schedule older than any of them could imagine.

## EYEWITNESS PERSPECTIVES

# What They Were Feeling

The Gospels give us fragments — but if we read carefully, we can hear distinct emotional registers from everyone who was present that day.

C

THE GALILEAN PILGRIMS

"Save us now! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

Their emotion was euphoric hope mixed with urgent longing. They had watched Jesus heal the sick, raise Lazarus, and teach with impossible authority. Many genuinely believed the Kingdom of God was about to arrive — visibly, politically, now. They spread their cloaks on the ground, an act reserved for kings (2 Kings 9:13). They expected a coronation, not a crucifixion. Their hope was real; their expectations were catastrophically wrong about the form it would take.

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P

THE DISCIPLES — PETER, JAMES, JOHN

*"Could this finally be the moment? He's riding in like Solomon. Like a king. Like the one we've been waiting for."*

Even the closest disciples did not understand what was happening. John explicitly tells us: "His disciples did not understand these things at first" (John 12:16). They were swept up in the excitement, probably shouting with the crowd. They would only grasp the prophetic weight of this moment *after* the resurrection. Right now, they were caught between awe and bewilderment, full of a hope they hadn't yet learned to grieve.

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Ph

THE PHARISEES

*"Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"*

Their emotion was panic dressed as outrage. John 11:48 gives us their real fear: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation." They weren't primarily worried about theology. They were worried about Roman reprisal. They had built a careful accommodation with Roman power, and this procession threatened to unravel everything. When Jesus answered them — "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" — he was not being poetic. He was announcing that what was happening was beyond anyone's ability to stop.

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J

JUDAS ISCARIOT

*"This is it. This has to be the moment he reveals himself. He has to act now."*

We don't know exactly what Judas was thinking this day, but we know he would betray Jesus within the week for thirty silver pieces. Some scholars suggest Judas's betrayal was not simply greed but disillusionment — he wanted a political Messiah, a general, a revolutionary, and Jesus kept refusing to be one. If so, Palm Sunday may have been his last surge of hope. The same crowd energy that made the disciples euphoric may have deepened Judas's private despair as Jesus, once again, rode past the moment of decisive action.

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R

THE ROMAN SOLDIERS

*"Watch this carefully. Report everything."*

From the Antonia Fortress, soldiers would have had a clear view of the procession. Their concern was purely strategic: crowd size, weapons visible, choke points, who was leading. Pilate had crushed previous Messianic movements without hesitation. The procession would have been noted, discussed, and filed. The centurions did not yet know they were watching the man they would crucify in five days.

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*"He said my anointing was for his burial. I think I understand more than the others do."*

Six days earlier, Mary had anointed Jesus's feet with expensive nard (John 12:1-8), and Jesus had interpreted this as preparation for his burial — a claim none of the disciples understood or wanted to hear. If Mary grasped, even dimly, what Jesus had said, then she may have been the only person watching the procession who understood it was not a coronation march but a funeral procession moving in slow motion toward its end.

## WHAT ARCHAEOLOGY TELLS US

# The Physical World of Palm Sunday

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

**The Road from Bethphage to Jerusalem.** The ancient path over the Mount of Olives that Jesus would have followed is still partially traceable today. Archaeological surveys have identified sections of a first-century road descending the western slope of the Mount of Olives toward the Kidron Valley. The descent is steep and rocky, making the choice of a donkey — rather than walking — not just symbolic but practical.

**The Antonia Fortress.** Excavations beneath the Sisters of Zion Convent in Jerusalem have uncovered large stone paving blocks which earlier archaeologists identified as the *lithostratos* (stone pavement) of the Antonia Fortress. More recent scholarship suggests these may date to the second century AD, but the fortress itself is historically attested by both Josephus and the New Testament. It stood at the northwest corner of the Temple Mount, exactly where Roman soldiers would have had the clearest view of any procession entering the city.

**Herod's Temple.** The Temple that Jesus surveyed that afternoon was Herod the Great's masterwork, begun around 20 BC and not fully completed until AD 63 — just seven years before its destruction. Excavations south of the Temple Mount (the Ophel excavations) have uncovered massive Herodian-era stones, some weighing over 400 tonnes, that give a visceral sense of the scale of the structure Jesus called "a den of robbers." The Temple Mount's retaining walls still stand — the Western Wall is the most famous surviving section.

**Pilgrimage Infrastructure.** The City of David excavations have uncovered the Stepped Street — a broad, monumental staircase leading from the Pool of Siloam up to the Temple Mount — likely the very route Passover pilgrims used to ascend to the Temple. Thousands of ancient stone vessels (used for ritual

purity) have been found in first-century Jerusalem strata, confirming the intense religious observance described in the Gospels.

One of the most striking findings from first-century Jerusalem archaeology is what it reveals about *scale*. The Herodian city was genuinely monumental — purpose-built to impress and overwhelm pilgrims. A man from Galilee, entering on a donkey, was making a visual argument that could not have been missed: the Kingdom I bring does not look like this.

## HIDDEN DIMENSIONS

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# What We Usually Miss

## 1 Jesus entered Jerusalem on the exact day the lamb was selected

This is not mentioned explicitly in the Gospels — it emerges only when you cross-reference with Exodus 12:3 and the Jewish calendar. Nisan 10 was the day every household in Israel chose their Passover lamb and brought it home for inspection. On this precise day, the true Passover Lamb rode into the city. For four days — Nisan 10 through 14 — he would be examined by the religious authorities, by Pilate, by Herod, by the crowd. All would find him without fault. Then on Nisan 14 he would be sacrificed at 3 PM — the same hour the Temple lambs were killed. The calendar was not coincidence. It was announcement.

## 2 The two crowds explain the apparent contradiction of Holy Week

One of the oldest objections to the Gospel accounts is: how could the same crowd that shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday shout "Crucify!" on Friday? The answer may lie in Matthew's careful distinction between "the crowds" and "the city." The Hosanna crowd was predominantly Galilean pilgrims who had followed Jesus from Jericho — they knew him, had seen miracles, were his constituency. The Friday crowd before Pilate was assembled in Jerusalem, at dawn, under pressure from the Sanhedrin, and composed largely of Jerusalem residents and Temple establishment supporters. They were, in significant part, different people.

## 3 The Pharisees' complaint to Jesus is itself a confession

When the Pharisees demanded Jesus silence his disciples, they were acknowledging that the crowd's Messianic acclamation was happening and they couldn't stop it themselves. Jesus' response — "if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" — has often been read as poetic hyperbole. But in its original context, with the Temple's massive Herodian stones visible all around them, it may have been something

more pointed: even the stones of this human institution bear witness to what is happening today, whether you want them to or not.

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## 4 Jesus wept — at his own parade

Luke 19:41-44 places Jesus's weeping over Jerusalem *during* the procession, as the city came into view from the Mount of Olives. This is the emotional centre of Palm Sunday that we most often omit from our celebrations. The same Jesus who was receiving royal acclaim was simultaneously sobbing — not from joy, but from grief. He could see what the crowd could not: that within forty years (AD 70), Titus would surround this city with an earthwork, starve it, breach its walls, and destroy the Temple so completely that Josephus reports that not one stone was left atop another. Jesus was mourning the future even as the crowd celebrated what they thought was the present.

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## 5 Mark's detail about the "look around" is everything

Only Mark records that Jesus entered the Temple, *looked around at everything*, and left (Mark 11:11). This quiet, observational moment before the dramatic cleansing the next morning is the action of a deliberate mind. Jesus did not act impulsively. He surveyed, he considered, he left. He returned to Bethany. He came back the next morning with intention. This is not the behaviour of an opportunist or a mob agitator. It is the behaviour of someone who knows exactly what he is doing, who is working from a script far older than that week.

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### STUDY GUIDE

## Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1 The crowd's cry of "Hosanna!" was a desperate plea — "Save now!" — not a celebration. What does it tell us about the crowd's spiritual state that their worship and their need were the same cry at the same moment? In what ways do you come to God with the same mixture of praise and urgent desperation?

PSALM 118:25-26 · LUKE 19:37-38

2 Jesus chose a donkey — the ancient symbol of a king arriving in peace — over a warhorse. The crowd wanted a military Messiah; he gave them a peace-proclaiming king. Where in your own expectations of God do you find yourself wanting the

warhorse — the dramatic intervention, the visible victory — when God is offering you the donkey: the slower, quieter, peaceable way?

ZECHARIAH 9:9 · MATTHEW 21:5 · JOHN 14:27

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3

Luke records that Jesus wept over Jerusalem in the middle of his own triumphal procession. What does it mean to you that Jesus was grieving for the very people who were celebrating him — because he could see what they couldn't? How does this shape your understanding of how Jesus sees you?

LUKE 19:41-44 · MATTHEW 23:37

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4

John tells us the disciples "did not understand these things at first" but later remembered and believed (John 12:16). Think of a time when you only understood what God was doing *after* it was over. What does this teach us about how faith works in the middle of events we can't yet see the shape of?

JOHN 12:16 · ROMANS 8:28

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5

The Nisan 10 timing — the day the Passover lamb was selected — was no coincidence. Jesus entered Jerusalem as God's own selection. Spend time with the image of the Passover household: for four days they lived with the lamb, knew it, perhaps named it, before the sacrifice. What does it mean that God chose to present his Son in this way — not distant and abstract, but close, present, known — before offering him?

EXODUS 12:3-6 · JOHN 1:29 · 1 PETER 1:19-20

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6

The Pharisees' fear was not primarily theological but political — they worried about Roman reprisal and the loss of their institutional power. In what ways can our own fear of losing comfort, influence, or stability cause us to resist what God is doing, even when we can see it happening in front of us?

JOHN 11:47-53 · JOHN 12:19 · ACTS 5:38-39

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#### DIG DEEPER — PRIMARY SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Josephus, Jewish Wars 6.93

First-century account of Passover sacrifice numbers;  
Roman-Jewish war context

Josephus, Antiquities 17-18

Herod's Temple construction; Pilate's governorship and  
character

Alfred Edersheim, The Temple (1874)

N.T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God

Classic account of Temple ritual, Passover lamb selection, and priestly procedures

Craig Keener, Commentary on Matthew

Extensive cultural background on the Triumphal Entry and crowd dynamics

Scholarly treatment of Jesus's Temple actions and Messianic self-understanding

Excavations at the Ophel (Eilat Mazar)

Archaeological findings from Herodian Jerusalem south of the Temple Mount



*"As he was drawing near — already on the way down the Mount of Olives — the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen."*

LUKE 19:37 · DAY ONE OF THE FINAL WEEK