

Hosanna in the Highest: Mark 11:1-11
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This morning we enter into a new section of the Gospel of Mark. If you think of Mark as a three act play, we are now at the start of the third act. In Act I, Jesus was ministering in Galilee and beyond Galilee. In Act II, which starts with Peter's confession in 8:27-30, Jesus and His disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. We learned much about discipleship in those chapters. Three times Jesus predicts His death and resurrection, and He teaches about what it means to follow Him, to be a disciple, to be a servant and slave of all, to be last, to deny yourself and take up your cross. Last week we saw a vivid illustration of this when Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus. The last verse in chapter 10 says that Bartimaeus recovered his sight and followed Jesus on the way. That's what a true disciple does. He follows Jesus on the way.

Now we come to the beginning of chapter 11 where Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. He has been on the way to Jerusalem. He has predicted what is going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. He has been determined and unswerving in the mission for which He was sent. He is going to Jerusalem to die and then to rise again. That is His mission, and nothing can deter Him from accomplishing it.

Mark 11 is the beginning of the end. This is the beginning of the final week leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection, and it's going to be a wonderful experience for us in the coming weeks to look carefully into these events of Passion week. Passion week begins with the triumphal entry and what is known as "Palm Sunday." This is what we read of in Mark 11:1-11, and it's where we're going to begin this morning.

"Hosanna in the highest!" was their cry. Hosanna means, "Save us!" But it had also become a shout of acclamation, a way of expressing praise to God (like "Hallelujah"). And they were saying this to the One in the highest—God, Himself. Save us. We praise you. There's a powerful connection in these words, even though it was lost on the crowd that day. They were mainly seeking political salvation. But the words they shouted that day are exactly right if we understand these words, as they should be understood, in terms of true, eternal salvation.

We cry out to Jesus, "Save us!" And in that same cry we are saying, "May You be praised!" The cry for help is also a shout of praise, because our need of Him highlights His greatness. God is shown to be great and mighty when we acknowledge our desperate need for Him. "Hosanna in the highest!" is exactly the right thing to say to Jesus, even though these pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem did not grasp the significance of their own words.

They were caught up in the excitement of a possible political Messiah. But even in their misunderstanding they shouted some things that are exactly right, if we understand them in the proper context. “Hosanna!” “Save us!” which is, at the same time, an acknowledgement of our need and a declaration of His greatness. Jesus is the One to whom we say, “Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna!” It’s not a political regime we need to be saved from. We need to be saved from ourselves. We need to be saved from our own sin. We need to be saved from the wrath of God that burns in divine fury against our horrible sins. “Hosanna” should be the cry of our hearts today. We need to be saved, and Jesus is the only One who can save us. So we express our need, and we extol His saving grace, in the simply phrase, “Hosanna in the highest.”

This is a fascinating progression of events as Jesus approaches Jerusalem. Let’s consider what we learn about our Savior in this passage. Who is this One to whom we cry, “Hosanna in the highest”? He is both a sovereign King and a humble Savior. We’ll think about each of those descriptions in light of these verses.

Here they are approaching Jerusalem from the east. The Mount of Olives is on the east side of the city. Bethphage was a small village close to Jerusalem, and Bethany was a town a little further to the east of the city.

And it was time. It was time for Jesus to make His grand entrance into Jerusalem. It was time for Him to go public in a way He had not done up to this point. Do you remember some of the places where Jesus tried to be secretive about His miracles? He said to the leper in 1:44, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest . . .” After raising Jairus’s daughter from the dead, Jesus “strictly charged them that no one should know this” (5:43). After Peter said, “You are the Christ,” Jesus strictly charged them to tell no one about Him (8:30). When they were coming down the mountain after the transfiguration, Jesus charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead (9:9). Jesus was secretive about these things because it wasn’t yet time. But now it’s time. The secrecy is over. His death is imminent. He boldly and openly proceeds into the city where He will be condemned and killed.

Jesus proceeds directly to the headquarters of those who oppose Him most fiercely. The religious leaders of Jerusalem have already been very troubled by this man, Jesus. They have already been scoping Him out, looking for ways to bring Him down. In 3:22 it says that “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.’” And in 7:1, again, it’s the Pharisees “with some of the scribes who had come from

Jerusalem” who questioned Jesus about His disciples not washing their hands. They have been seeking Him out, trying to undermine His authority and squelch His popularity.

But now Jesus is coming right to their doorstep. In fact, He’s going to come right into their most cherished place—the temple. And He’s going to go ballistic! There is no more secrecy now. There is no more attempt to keep a low profile in any way. The confrontation between Jesus and the religious establishment is going to escalate rapidly over the course of this final week, and Jesus clearly understands and intends for it to result in His death on a cross.

That’s what Jesus is walking into. And He walks into it both as a sovereign King and a humble Savior. He is not caught off guard by anything that happens. He is not overpowered by His enemies. He does not, at any moment, lose control of the situation. Albert Schweitzer wrote these words, which I think get it exactly wrong: “Jesus . . . in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign.”¹

That’s not what happened. Schweitzer thinks that Jesus was a great man who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong crowd, and ended up dead on a cross. That couldn’t be further from the truth. Jesus knew what was going to happen. He was in control of everything that happened. And He arrived precisely at the right time and in the right place and with the right crowd, and He voluntarily submitted Himself to death on a cross, only to rise again on the third day.

Jesus doesn’t unknowingly get mixed up in something that’s too big for Him to handle. He takes each step knowing and controlling every detail of what happens. He is the sovereign King.

Look at how this is evident in the way He acquires the colt for Himself. He sent two of his disciples. It doesn’t say which disciples He sent. He said to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord has need of it and

¹ *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, quoted in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament*, page 214.

will send it back here immediately.” That is a very curious errand, indeed. It’s been amusing to me this week to try to imagine what these two disciples must have been thinking. Imagine if someone told you, “Go over to the Best Buy and grab one of the laptops that are on display, and bring it back here. And if the security system goes off, just tell them that we need it right now, but we’ll bring it back later.” This would have been really awkward for these two disciples. As they walked over to the village they must have been arguing about which of them would speak up if they were questioned. “You say it.” “No, you say it.”

Verses 4-6 tell us what happened, and it’s just as Jesus told them. Sure enough, they found a colt. There it was tied at a door outside in the street. They must have looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, taken a quick look around, and then they untied it. Surely they were hoping it would go unnoticed. But then some of those standing there said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” This is where it got really uncomfortable. The disciples probably looked at each other again, as if to say, “You say it,” “No, you say it.” I imagine them stammering and stuttering and stumbling over their words, knowing that this looked really bad and the only thing they had to say sounded really weird. Finally they got it out, “Yeah, um, the Lord, uh, has need of it . . . and, uh, He’ll send it back here immediately.” To their surprise and delight, the people let them go. What a bizarre experience that must have been! On the way back to Jesus they would have been marveling at this. Wow, the colt was right where Jesus said it would be, and the people said just what Jesus told us they would say, and then we said what Jesus told us to say, and they did just what Jesus said they would do!

That’s power. That’s omniscience. That’s a sovereign King. He owns everything. He has rights over everything. He was not stealing the colt, or even borrowing it from its owner. He was taking what rightfully belonged to Him, and He was going to use it for a special purpose. John Calvin says of this event, “In this way [Jesus] proved his Divinity; for both to know absent matters, and to bend the hearts of men to compliance, belonged to God alone. The result shows that the whole of this affair was directed by God.”²

This colt served a special purpose because it was a fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus didn’t send for this colt because His legs were tired, and He didn’t want to walk the last stretch of road to Jerusalem. Jesus sent for the colt because, by riding this colt into Jerusalem, He was going to send a message—a messianic message. Notice in verse 2 Jesus says that this colt had never been ridden by anyone before. This was a colt that had been saved for

² Commentary on Harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke, page 449.

just this occasion. It had been set aside for a sacred and royal purpose.

The Old Testament points forward to this event. Zechariah 9:9 says, “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.” Mark doesn’t insert this quotation, but Matthew and John do in their record of the triumphal entry. Jesus was clearly fulfilling this prophecy. This is how the king was going to come.

There is also an allusion to this in Genesis 49, where Jacob prophesies of Judah, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes” (Genesis 49:10-11). The Old Testament pointed to this, even from the very first book. This is the Messiah. Sovereign King and humble Savior.

Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom of God and how it is so different than the kingdom of man. His arrival in Jerusalem in this way is another picture of this. He doesn’t come in on a war horse, decked out in armor, bearing a sword, with defeated captives trailing behind Him. That would have made the experience all the more exciting for the bystanders. But that’s not how Jesus came. He *is* the sovereign King. He is ruler of all and has power over all. But He comes to Jerusalem in a humble way, riding on a donkey, a donkey that doesn’t even have a saddle (the disciples had to put their own cloaks on it before Jesus sat down).

Riding on a donkey was a proclamation of who Jesus is—the Messiah—in fulfillment of prophecy. And it was also a description of what He is like—humble and peaceful. Like the Zechariah prophecy says, “humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

In verse 8 we read that the crowd gave Jesus the royal treatment as He approached Jerusalem. The crowd would have been extremely large. It’s estimated that as many as 2 and a half million people could have been in Jerusalem during Passover. So the road leading into Jerusalem at this time would have been absolutely crowded with pilgrims on their way to the holy city. On this particular pilgrimage, the word on the street was Jesus of Nazareth. Did you hear what He did? Have you heard about the authority with which He teaches? I just saw Him raise a man named Lazarus from the dead! (John 11)

Luke 19:37 says that “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.” They had seen a lot of mighty works. They had seen Jesus do some amazing, miraculous things. And now the energy and excitement of the people can no longer be contained, and Jesus no longer tries to contain it, and the crowd erupts in rejoicing and praise. They even throw down their cloaks on the road, and spread leafy branches on the road and palm branches (which the Gospel of John mentions, John 12:13). In this way they were hailing Him as king (compare 2 Kings 9:13, where Jehu is declared to be king). This was the red carpet they were rolling out for Him.

And this was their song: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” Part of this comes from Psalm 118:25-26, which is part of a collection of songs (Psalm 113-118) used in the Jewish festivals in Jerusalem. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” it says in Psalm 118:26. Then the crowd adds, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!” This expresses their messianic expectations. They are looking for the Son of David, the promised Messiah.

Blind Baritmaeus had eyes to see this about Jesus. He called out to Him, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47-48) Now the crowd makes a similar declaration, but in a mostly superficial and unbelieving manner. They spoke better than they knew. Jesus is the true King, but He was not the king they were looking for. John MacArthur summarizes this passage in a helpful way by calling it the false coronation of the true King.³ Jesus is the true King, but this is not a true coronation. The crowd extols Him with true affirmations about His identity. And yet they do not yet grasp what is going on. In the parallel account in John 12:16, right after the quotation from Zechariah that the king will come sitting on a donkey’s colt, it says that “[Jesus’] disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.” So at this point it is a false coronation. They don’t yet truly see Him for who He is. They don’t yet see everything clearly. The immense crowd certainly does not see the truth of what is happening. They are caught up in the excitement of the moment, but they don’t perceive the immense significance of what is happening in their midst.

This becomes clear in verse 11 when we realize that the crowd dissipated as quickly as it had come together. It’s an interesting feature of this text that the crowd suddenly appears in

³ http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/41-56_The-False-Coronation-of-the-True-King

verse 8, and then the crowd is surprisingly absent already in verse 11. If there was any real allegiance behind the words that they sang out, wouldn't you think they would stick with Jesus? Considering the mass celebration that has been going on, verse 11 is pretty anticlimactic.

“And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.” The crowd is gone. Jesus heads into the city and goes straight to the temple. That's where He's going to have a head-on collision with the religious establishment. It says, He “looked around at everything.” That's not a throw away phrase in the context of this chapter. It prepares us for what is going to happen on the next day. Jesus will come back to the temple the following day, and He will unleash His righteous anger on those who are desecrating God's house. At this point He is scoping things out. He has just arrived in Jerusalem, it's in the evening, and He and the twelve go out to Bethany for the night.

In closing I want to briefly mention four ways that the message of this text should impact our lives. Two have to do with what we've observed about this crowd, and two have to do with what we've observed about Jesus.

First of all, we should be very aware of the danger of being like this crowd. We are so prone to getting excited about some spiritual movement or political movement, and we think that since Jesus' name is connected with it in some way that it's got to be the real deal. We should be careful not to get caught up in the excitement of some religious experience just because people are claiming the name of Jesus. As we see in this passage, there can be a lot of excitement and a lot of songs and shouting and even true things that are said about Jesus, and all of it without an authentic allegiance to Jesus.

Another point concerning the crowd: this should be a reminder to us not to live for the praise of man. Crowds are fickle. Public opinion will change from day to day. Therefore it would be foolish to build your life around trying to have lots of people think highly of you. Don't be swayed by the praise of man or the criticism of man. Don't get puffed up by complements, and don't get depressed when criticism comes your way. Simply do the things that God has called you to do, and be faithful in those things. Look to Him and find your joy and satisfaction in Him, not in the opinion that others have of you. Jesus is such a great example for us. He presses on in the task for which He was sent. The crowds come and go, at certain points applauding Him, and at the end crying out for His crucifixion. In the midst of it all, Jesus stays the course. Let us do likewise.

We've seen in these verses that Jesus is both our sovereign King and humble Savior. As sovereign King, Jesus knew exactly what He was walking into. He was in complete control of everything that was going to happen to Him. He is omniscient and omnipotent. He is sovereign. He knows what lies ahead, and He controls what lies ahead. What I hope will be an encouragement to us this morning is to be reminded that Jesus not only knew what was in store for Himself, but He also knows and controls the events in your life as well. Take comfort in that. Do not be anxious. Do not fret. Find refuge under the wings of our strong redeemer. He is sovereign. He is King. Whatever trials you are facing right now, whatever trials you fear may face you in the future, Jesus knows these things, and He is in control. Trust in our sovereign King.

Finally, we should also be struck by Jesus' humility. He is a humble Savior. This portrait of Him riding on a donkey on His way to the cross is a vivid display of His humble sacrifice. It's what He said to His disciples in 10:45, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Again, He is our example. We are to be humble servants. If we are to be disciples, we are to follow Him in this way. For to follow Him is to become like Him. And we remember that His kingdom is not about earthly glory, earthly power, earthly fame. The economy of God's kingdom has an entirely different currency, and Jesus models that for us in His humble and selfless sacrifice.

He is an example for us, but far more importantly, He is our Savior from sin. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of David. He is the Anointed One of God who comes to save His people from their sin. Therefore He is the One to whom we cry, "Hosanna [save us]! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!" In this way we acknowledge our desperate need for Him, and we highlight His greatness and power. This is a cry for help and an expression of worship. Let's call out to Him now.