

Palm Sunday

Today we're going to look at the story of Palm Sunday—an event described in all four Gospels where Jesus makes a triumphant entry into Jerusalem during the last week of His life. As we do, we'll take a little time to pause and think about our own answers to some very important—I would say life-changing—questions.

The 'Palm' in Palm Sunday refers to the Palm Branches that the crowd laid down along Jesus' path as a symbol—a tribute—to Jesus. This act shouted, "This is someone special!"

Matthew 21:1-5 pg. 482

1 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.'"

That prophecy is the actual quote from Zechariah 9:9. The Jews who were listening, would have recognized Jesus saying this as a fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy. We might think, "why did Jesus ride a donkey? A horse is so much cooler!" However, in that culture, a donkey was a symbol of peace. A horse was an animal of war. Jesus rode into town on a donkey to show that he'd come in peace.

Matthew 21:6-9

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!"

"Hosanna" is a Hebrew expression that is translated, "Save Now." This act: laying down their garments and waving the branches is something that was reserved for high royalty. They recognized that Jesus is who He said He was... He is the Savior. This Palm Sunday event brings us to the first question:

Matthew 21:10-11

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."

1. A QUESTION OF IMPORTANCE: Who is this guy Jesus?

For life to have real meaning, this question has to be answered. Unlike the Scripture we just read, the crowd can't answer it for you.

You've got to answer this question for yourself. Unlike other religions, you're not born into faith in Jesus. A lot of people think because they were born in America that it makes them a Christian. It's no more true than if you're born in Starbucks that it makes you a Frappuccino.

Who is Jesus to you? Is He a good teacher? Is He a con who has fooled people for 2000 years? Or, is He who he said He was, "God in the flesh."?

I would guess 75% of us have this answered. Not everyone. Maybe you are unsure about church, faith, Jesus. Some of you might be sitting here thinking, "I'm not religious, I came to play and hang out with my friends!"

If that's you, relax, we're not trying to be super religious. The question, "WHO IS THIS?" is still being asked 2,000 years after His death. Jesus is the most revered person to have ever lived and He is worth your investigation.

If you haven't answered it yet, I encourage you to give it some thought and we're here every week to help you think through that question. It's a very important question. In fact, I would say, that the most important question in life is "Who is Jesus?"

2. A QUESTION OF DESIRE: Am I really drawn to something different?

Jesus calls His followers to be different. Different is scary. Different takes courage. Being the "Same" is comfortable. Same is warm and safe. The desire we are talking about is that gut-feeling within you that says, "I want something different for my life, for my faith, my relationships, for my future."

This is a huge part of why the people have gathered to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. They saw something different about Him. He could perform miracles and had powerfully taught about God and how to follow Him. They may not have understood everything, but the crowd could see that Jesus was different in a good way.

When you want your life to matter, to be different in a good way, it won't happen by accident. It begins with DESIRE! It begins with a desire to be different.

Jesus' life and the way He calls his follower to live is attractive, magnetic, challenging, and transforming. Don't be fooled, Jesus isn't weak or comes with a message that is easy to follow. Jesus' teaching was radically different. He blew people away with what he called them to do. Jesus said things like:

- Don't point out the speck in another's eye. Deal with the log in your own.
- Do to others what you'd like them to do to you.
- You've heard it said before don't murder, but I say, "The anger in your heart is killing people."
- You've heard it said before don't commit adultery, but I say, "The lust in your heart is adultery."
- Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.

The way of Jesus isn't easy... it's actually radical!

Matthew 7:13-14 pg. 474

13 "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

There's the route the world offers: being the same as everyone and aligning ourselves with the world's values. That's easy to do—that's like walking through the wide gate. Following Jesus is not the easy route.

If you've been walking the world's way and would like to shift toward following Jesus' path, a way to begin shifting your desires is to start praying something like this:

God,

I desire You. I desire to live Your ways. I desire to reflect You today.

I desire Your will and whatever You bring my way.

Amen.

Pray these words before you get out of bed, before you start your school day, before you engage with your social media, before you get busy with the distractions of a normal day... prepare your heart with words of desire.

It all starts with desire. The question of desire will impact your decisions.

3. A QUESTION OF DECISIONS: Am I willing to follow?

This is not only a huge question we need to answer, it's also a daily question. To wake up and follow my way and my agenda or to follow His way and His agenda.

Here's why this is a difficult question: because I love MY agenda! Why? Because of the key word: "MY." My ideas are good. My plans are exciting. The reason following Jesus is difficult is because of my SELFISHNESS.

- Would you be willing to invite someone to sit with you and your friends even if they don't really "fit in" with you?
- Would you be willing to go find the new kid or visitor every week when you come to church instead of looking for the people you know?
- Even if the music was bad and the message was terrible, you'd still come here every week, because it's not what you get out of it. You're here to worship, regardless of the quality?
- When it comes to your money, would you happily give a 10% tithe—maybe even beyond that?

One of the ways you know you're growing spiritually is when you find yourself being less selfish. When you used to be a 10 on the selfish scale and you're now a 9 or 8 or 7 (you're moving in the right direction of less-selfish). That means something is changing within you. The Spirit of God is doing His work to transform your selfish character in to a more self-less character. Follow Him closely and you'll become more like him.

This is the hurdle for a lot of people in their spiritual journey that is difficult to get over. Jesus set the record for following God, He did so perfectly throughout his whole life, even to the point of death on the cross. Yet through His obedience God has exalted the name of Jesus above every name.

Philippians 2:8-11

8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This may be shocking to some of you, but God isn't waiting to heap His blessings and power into your plan for living. God is waiting for us to courageously escape our selfish agenda and make decisions that follow or align with what He wants for us. That's what God blesses: obedience.

God's blessing is waiting for those who make decisions to put Him first. This blessing might not come in the form of my agenda: it might not mean I get the position on the sports team, or admitted to the college I want, or find the perfect person to date, but it also might be those things.

Most of the pain and heartache I've experienced in my life points back to choosing MY WAY over the ways of Jesus. Then I'm crazy enough to act surprised when my way slams me into a dead end.

Here's what I've been learning: when the question of DESIRE and the question of DECISIONS are met with "YES" answers, it typically results in devotion. This leads us to our 4th and final question:

4. A QUESTION OF DEVOTION: What gets your primary attention?

DESIRE + DECISIONS = DEVOTION: It's really simple, when my answers to questions two and three are "yes..." my primary attention is given to Jesus.

The answer to this question is usually obvious. It's seen in our desires and decisions. For me, I want to be devoted to Jesus, not devoted to Christianity or religion or even attending church. I want to be devoted simply to Jesus. I want to walk with Him, to be filled with God's Spirit, to be in tune with and connected to and led by Him.

Conclusion

Please, don't miss the big questions! Take these questions home with you. I'd love for you to spend some time making the answers personal to you. Then, sometime in the next month, I'd love to meet with you and hear your answers to see if I can help you as you seek to follow Jesus. If you'd feel more comfortable sharing your answers with your small group leader, that would be even better! But don't let these questions go unanswered.

- (1) Who is Jesus?
- (2) Do you really desire to be different?
- (3) Are you really willing to follow?
- (4) What are you currently devoted to? What's getting your primary attention?

Small Group Questions

- How would you answer the question, “who is Jesus?”
- Why would you say that answering that question is important for every person?
- Based on what you know about Jesus, why was he different in a good way?
- Why is being different in a good way attractive or desirable?
- Why do you think Jesus called his follower to be different like him?
- Use your imagination, what about Jesus’ life would have been hard?
- Why is it hard to follow God’s way instead of your own way?
- Why do you think God blesses obedience to His way instead of our own way.
- How does a desire to be different in a good way and a willingness to follow Jesus produce devotion to God?
- What does that look like in the real world?
 - So when Jesus says, “Follow me and serve others” but your agenda is to be comfortable and serve yourself... what’s your decision?
 - Or when Jesus says, “Follow me and forgive that person who has wronged you” and your plan is to get revenge... what’s your decision?
 - So when Jesus says, “Follow me and be generous” and your agenda is to gather and gain more to support your comfort... what’s your decision?