

Hosanna: A Call to Salvation and Submission on Palm Sunday

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One cry that has echoed throughout the history of humanity, ever since mankind fell from the grace of God, is the desperate plea for salvation. This cry seeks deliverance from the clutches of Satan and sin, relief from the fear of death's shadow, healing from illness, liberation from all forms of bondage, and, at times, even freedom from oneself. If we were to encapsulate this longing in a single word, it would be "Hosanna." "Hosanna" is the cry that resonated through the air on that eventful Sunday over two thousand years ago when Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today, we commemorate that moment as Palm Sunday.

When the crowd in Jerusalem shouted, "Hosanna!" they used it as an expression of acclamation or praise. This is perhaps the common understanding of the word among the faithful even today. However, that is not the literal meaning of the word when it is translated from Hebrew. This can be seen in Psalm 118, verse 25, where it reads, "Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD." In Hebrew, this is expressed as "Hosanna." Hosanna is a liturgical word in both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, it is always used in its original Hebrew form, Hosanna. The crowd was, in their ignorance, partially correct; Jesus indeed is the Messiah, the deliverer who would save His people. However, the salvation and deliverance He offered were far greater than they realised or could comprehend. The significance of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, during the final stage of His determined journey to the Cross, is such that all four Gospel accounts recount this event and the subsequent events of Passion Week.

In Luke 19:41, we read, "And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it." Let us briefly explore the reasons behind Jesus' tears for Jerusalem. The road Jesus and His companions travelled crested upward just outside the village of Bethphage, then dipped down, revealing the plateau beyond. There lay the beautiful city of Jerusalem, seemingly rising from the earth. The magnificent golden Temple stood at the centre. From this vantage point, Jesus could see the entire city, especially the Temple with its courts, as well as the thousands of travellers who were camped on the surrounding hillside for the Passover celebration. The Jewish historian Josephus put the number gathered for the feast as high as three million, though most historians today regard that figure as a considerable exaggeration and estimate the true numbers, while still remarkable, in the low hundreds of thousands. It was the intense love He held for His people that compelled Him to endure the crucifixion. And as He beheld all this — the sights and the people — Jesus wept.

He wept because those people chose to be blind:

- blind to the arrival of their Saviour;
- blind to the deliverance and salvation He was ready to provide;
- blind to the message of the Kingdom of God;
- blind to the actions of their leaders against the Messiah.

Because of this blindness, they would face tragic consequences. Jesus declared that not one stone would be left upon another. His prophecy came to pass before the turn of the century when Roman legions under Titus invaded Jerusalem and reduced it to ruins. This marked the horrific and tragic end of Jerusalem. They failed to recognise Jesus for who He was — their Saviour and their Messiah. Their hearts were hardened, and so our Lord's heart broke, prompting His tears. Friends, what do you think Jesus feels when He looks upon the world today? A world that is going blind, as history repeats itself. I assure you that Jesus weeps when He observes us right now. The question before each of us this evening is: "Does your relationship with Jesus move you to weep for the things that break His heart?"

Returning to His triumphal entry, we find that the entire scene resonates with Old Testament allusions. Jesus begins His final march from the Mount of Olives, a traditional location for the Messiah, as prophesied in Zechariah 14:4, which states, "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east." His entry is "triumphal," but not in a military or political sense, as many assumed would befit the Messiah. Military leaders rode on war horses, while donkeys were reserved for messengers of peace. In His characteristic manner, Jesus entered the city in a unique way, sending two clear signals: (1) He demonstrated that He was unafraid of the power and malice of His enemies in Jerusalem; thus, He did not sneak into the city incognito, and (2) He showed that He was not discouraged or anxious about His approaching passion and death on the cross. He came joyously, amid shouts of acclamation, fully assured of His victory over evil; He thus triumphed in the certainty of fulfilling His divine purpose.

Jesus now proceeds to fulfil the messianic prophecy and instructs His disciples to find the donkey upon which He would ride. In Zechariah 9:9, we read, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.” Although the crowd welcomed Him with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna,” none referred to Him as the Messiah or the Son of God. Instead, they acknowledged Him as someone who came “in the name of the LORD,” as noted in Psalm 118:26. They praised the arrival of “the kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:10), which is not the same as recognising the King of Kings Himself. Did they see Him as merely a prophet or something less?

The people identified Jesus with the king mentioned in Psalm 118 yet failed to grasp the true purpose of His coming. If that is the case, what was the source of their excitement? Undoubtedly, many were hoping for Jesus to “cut off” the Roman oppressors. Some might have desired Him to dismantle the current religious establishment — as Jesus Himself would do the very next day, driving the money changers from the Temple (Mark 11:15-17). Few, if any, understood that Satan and indwelling sin were the true enemies that Jesus came to defeat and eradicate “in the name of the LORD.” Jesus marched into Jerusalem with the divine objective of dying on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice — to redeem His people from sin and death; to open the eyes of the spiritually blind; to bring light to those walking in darkness; and to proclaim salvation to both Gentile and Jew alike — completing and making possible the good news of His Gospel. However, the crowd remained focused on relatively minor issues of political and religious oppression, remaining blind to the forces of darkness controlling much of the world.

They also overlooked the profound significance of the salvation Jesus offered — a kind of salvation far beyond their comprehension, one that would deliver them from sin, death, and Hell. Consequently, once they realised that His arrival came on His terms and not theirs, just a few days later their shouts of “Hosanna” transformed into cries of “Crucify him, crucify him.” They quickly shifted from ‘Hail Him’ to ‘Hate Him.’

When things do not unfold as we believe they should, we often become upset with God; we worry incessantly; we may even attempt to punish God by excluding Him from our thoughts, or we might run away from Him instead of turning to Him. In essence, the cries of “Crucify him, crucify him” can be paraphrased as “Get out of my life. Leave me alone. You did not follow my agenda, God. I know what is best for me! I refuse to trust you with anything. I am in control of my life now!” However, the Triumphal Entry illustrates that the scope of God’s plans extends far beyond what we can perceive or comprehend. Therefore, we should trust God’s agenda and His timing — rather than our own. We must allow God to be God, rather than treating Him like a genie who caters to our wishes.

In light of these events, Jesus issues a rather unusual command. He instructs His disciples to go into the village and find a colt on which no one has ever sat, to untie it, and bring it to Him. This act displays profound humility, a theme Jesus has often spoken about. Let us take a moment to reflect on that donkey. The Lord needed this donkey to fulfil His mission here on earth. Isn’t that remarkable? He chose to use this humble donkey as part of His grand mission. In fact, He still uses humble vessels to accomplish His work on earth. He could easily have assigned the task to angels, yet He chooses to work through human instruments. I am grateful to be part of the Lord’s work. I am thankful that He can use someone as insignificant as me!

Before we conclude our discussion about the donkey, let me highlight a few significant facts about it:

1. The Donkey Had to Be Loosed — A tethered colt could serve no purpose until someone untied it. In the same way, we can be of little use to the Lord while we remain bound by sin; those cords must first be cut. This is exactly the freedom Christ promises to those who trust Him: “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).
2. The Donkey Had to Be Redeemed — The Law given through Moses required that a firstborn donkey be bought back with the life of a lamb: “But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb” (Exodus 34:20a). That colt belonged to the Lord, and lived, only because a lamb had died in its place. In the very same way, we belong to God and live only because the Lamb of God died in ours.
3. The Donkey Had to Submit — Mark 11:2 tells us this colt had never once been ridden. An untamed animal could easily have bucked and bolted amid the noise of the crowd pressing in; instead, at the Lord’s touch, it went where it was led and carried Him without resistance. This is what He looks for in us too: not a grudging compliance, but total submission, complete surrender, and unwavering faith.

What are we as believers supposed to understand from our Lord’s triumphal entry? Here are a few lessons from this passage that we must contemplate seriously:

1. We must be prepared and willing for Jesus to claim the use of ourselves, our possessions, and our positions. Since He is our Master, these do not belong to us but to Him. When He sends a message saying, “the Lord hath need of him” (Mark 11:3), we must relinquish our control willingly and without hesitation.

2. There is a time to be cautious about our identity in Christ and a time to be completely open about it. We should not operate from a place of fear or self-absorption but remain sensitive to what Jesus desires us to do and then cooperate with His will.
3. Rejoicing and pain can coexist. This was evident in Jesus during the Triumphal Entry, and it often occurs in our own lives as well. Complete rejoicing will not be realised until we are able to rejoice fully in heaven after Jesus has wiped away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).
4. Perhaps one of the most profound teachings of this passage is that Jesus IS King! He IS the Messiah, God the Son, and it is only fitting that we worship Him.

Hosanna, Lord, please help us to be willing to obey Your instructions, even when we do not understand all the details or their significance. Thank You for the immense privilege You grant us to participate in Your mission and to play meaningful roles in what You are accomplishing. Help us to rejoice in You and praise You with open hearts, rather than resisting due to our pain or from the wounds of doubt and distrust. In Your holy name, we pray. Amen.