

Palm Sunday

A common misconception is that Palm Sunday was the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and was a spontaneous demonstration of His followers. The truth is that it was planned and orchestrated in every way. God had predicted it through the prophets as to time, place, and events. The prophet Daniel predicted that the exact time would be 483 years from the time the decree was issued to rebuild Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity and then “the Messiah will be cut off” (Daniel 9:25-26). Artaxerxes of Persia issued the decree about 444-445 BC. If you use 360 day years as the Bible does in prophecy then Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday 31,32,or 33 AD depending on which date you use to begin with and how you count the days. Theologians are divided between 30 AD, 31 AD, 32 AD, and 33, but obviously Daniel, speaking for God, knew the exact date that Jesus would be crucified.

The prophet Zechariah predicted that Messiah would enter Jerusalem “Humble, and mounted on a donkey, even a colt, the foal of a donkey.” In case you wondered if he was talking about Jesus, Matthew told us in the New Testament that Jesus did this very thing in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 (Matt.21:4-5). Jesus was sending a message that he was a humble self sacrificing king. How could Daniel know when, and Zechariah know how Jesus would enter Jerusalem? I believe it is as Daniel said in Daniel 2:28, “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries”.

Would the prophets even be able to predict what the crowd would say to Jesus when He rode into the city? The gospels tell us that the crowd was yelling and singing, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!” in fulfillment of Psalm 118:25-26. Hosanna meant “save us now” so clearly the crowd saw Jesus as the Messiah. Based on the prophecies in the Old Testament, God planned the time, the place, how He would enter, and what the crowd would say—hardly spontaneous.

More Misconceptions

Did you ever wonder why that huge crowd was there on the road outside of Jerusalem, at the gate, and on the streets of the city waiting for Jesus with palm branches expecting His coming? It was Passover week so many people had come from all over the Mediterranean world to attend Passover, but Jesus had attended many Passovers and had never been received like this—what was the difference this time? The Gospel of John tells us that the great and awesome miracle found in John 11 of the raising of Lazarus had all of Jerusalem in a buzz. Everyone was talking about it, and Lazarus was in Jerusalem telling everybody about it. Jesus certainly did that miracle because He loved Lazarus and his family, but there was even a higher purpose to prepare Jerusalem for His entry. John 12:9-11 tells us of the testimony of Lazarus in Jerusalem that was causing many to believe in Jesus, and John 12:18 tells us that because of the miracle “the multitude went and met Jesus because they heard He had performed this sign.”

Palm Sunday is often called the Triumphal Entry of Christ, but was it really? Outwardly it seemed to be, especially to the crowd, but not to Jesus. We get a glimpse as to His thinking in Luke 19:41-44. His heart didn't fill with joy because His eyes were filled with tears. He knew that the crowd's expectations for Him were misplaced, and He knew that the religious leaders wanted to kill Him. As Jesus approached the city He "wept over it, saying, 'If you had known in this day the things which make for peace!'" He went on to say that because of their rejection of Him the following Friday, the city would be judged because they did not recognize the time of their visitation by the Messiah. At this point you may be saying that they did welcome Him and they did see Him as the King and Savior, but this crowd was fickle. They were looking for a political/military king to overthrow Rome and bring in a kingdom of prosperity and grandeur like they had under David and Solomon, only better. It was clear from John 12:31-37 that they had an incorrect view of Him and what He came to do.

Notice the Contrasts

As the crowd cheered for Him, He cries for them. They seem to embrace Him, but He knows they will reject Him. After this, Jesus teaches about judgment and His crucifixion, but they contradict Him in Jn.12:34, and didn't believe Him in v.37. On Sunday they cheer for Him, but on Friday they yell "crucify Him".

Surely the Cleansing of the Temple Was Spontaneous

It is commonly thought that Jesus was surprised the next day when He went into the Temple and saw the crooked "moneychangers" defiling the house of God. Most think He got emotional and spontaneously flew into a rage. Mark 11:11 tells us that on Sunday Jesus went into the Temple and scoped it out (my translation). It says He "looked all around" then left and returned to Bethany where they were staying overnight. Jesus had been to the Temple many times at Passover so He certainly knew what abuses went on there. My point is that Jesus planned this from the very beginning. It was righteous anger on His part, but it was all according to God's predetermined plan. The very religious leaders who were rejecting Him were proven to be hypocrites by this episode. It also fulfilled yet another prophecy from Isaiah and Jeremiah, "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a robber's den."

What's Up with the Palm Branches ?

Palm branches had become a national tradition when Simon Maccabees drove out the Syrian forces about 200 years before. Maccabees was hailed as a conquering hero with a parade, singing, and waving of palm branches. This tradition came from Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah who would celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in which palm branches were waved. Therefore the crowd clearly was exercising a tradition of hailing a conqueror and identifying Jesus as the Messiah and King.

The Momentum Shift From Sunday to Friday

Put yourself in the crowd of first century Jerusalem when Jesus entered on Palm Sunday. You are very interested in improving your life and your future. You believe in God, but you are not quite sure what God's plan is, but you have heard a lot of teaching about a promised Messiah who will restore Israel to prominence and bring peace and prosperity. Now, here before you is Jesus, a miracle worker who seems to be fulfilling the teachings. You go with the momentum of the crowd, excited about what you hope will happen. You welcome Jesus into the city as the King. We read this story knowing that Jesus could have had the crown right then and avoided the cross.

Now go later in the same week to Friday morning in front of the Praetorium in Matt. 27:22-23. Governor Pilate asked the crowds of Jerusalem, "what shall I do with Jesus?", and they all said, "Crucify Him!" What caused the difference in the crowd's reaction to Jesus?

Many commentators will try to explain that it was a different crowd, but I think something more important is going on here. On Sunday they viewed Jesus as the prophesied Messiah who would restore the kingdom and their fortunes. The priests and religious leaders were intimidated by Jesus and feared the crowd too much to arrest Jesus on Sunday, but on Friday the crowd looked up to see an arrested and convicted felon standing before the authorities in submission in chains. He looked terrible, bloody, humiliated, and He was offering no defense. The priests publicly denounced Him, and exerted pressure and threats to any possible supporters. This was not the crowd's idea of a King. They were looking for a conqueror, a hero. Looking up at this humble defenseless, beat-up guy, they were very disappointed---even angry.

The REAL JESUS did not come to bring freedom from the tyranny of Rome. The real Jesus came to offer freedom from the tyranny of sin. This crowd in Jerusalem was just like the crowd Jesus spoke to in John 6:22-66. That sermon of Jesus is called the Bread of Life Discourse. The crowd had tried to take Him by force and make Him king in v.15, but Jesus withdrew from them because He knew His death and resurrection had to precede the kingdom. The crowd was persistent so Jesus delivered the sermon to them revealing that they needed to "eat His flesh and drink His blood", meaning they needed to embrace His sacrificial death on the cross so their sins could be forgiven. This was so disturbing to them that in John 6:66 the crowd "withdrew" from Him. Sound familiar to Friday of the Passion Week?

Nothing has changed today in people's desired perception of Jesus. They still want a leader who wants them to be healthy and rich. They still want Jesus to deal with all the social problems we continue to have. They still want a God of their own choosing, but God has given us something far better---redemption from our sins, forgiveness, and eternal life. **THE CROSS HAD TO COME BEFORE THE CROWN.**

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