

# Notes for Preaching | Palm Sunday | April 5, 2020

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## Introduction

We are in unusual times where pastoral leadership and ministry is tested in ways most of us have never experienced. Changes in how we do worship, preach, teach, perform pastoral care, and do administration, are causing us to be creative, proactive, and responsive.

In these days, to help you with preaching, I will be providing some exegetical and preaching insights on various Scripture passages. For the sake of brevity, this will not be exhaustive but hopefully will give you additional insights into the texts.

Please do your own exegesis, test what I have written, and prayerfully prepare the messages the Holy Spirit has for you and your flock. Our voices are different, but God's Word remains the controlling and living voice for us. I am praying for you.

We begin with a collection of texts related to Palm Sunday. Though my primary Gospel passage will be Matthew 21:1-11, I encourage you to read the parallels in Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, and John 12:12-19. Unless I indicate otherwise, I am using the New King James Version.

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## Old Testament Background Texts

In your first reading of Matthew 21, you likely noticed two Old Testament citations: Zechariah 9:9 (Matt. 21:4, 5) and Psalm 118:26 (Matt. 21:9). The background is important and can provide insights for your message. As an aside, I have learned much from reading New Testament scholars N.T. Wright and Richard Hays.<sup>1</sup>

### *Psalm 118:1-29 – Key Points*

1. Psalm 118 is the last of six Psalms called the Hallel Psalms (Ps 113-118). *Hallel* means praise in biblical Hebrew. Hays remarks, "The Hallel psalms were sung on the occasion of Israel's great national festivals of Tabernacles and Passover, and both of these festivals were associated with Israel's national liberation from bondage in Egypt."<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 inform us that when Jesus completed the Last Supper and his final teachings (John 12-17), that Jesus and the group sang a hymn and went to the Mount of Olives. They sang the Hallel Psalms, which concluded with Psalm 118. That means that Holy Week begins with Psalm 118, and Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemene with the same Psalm in His heart and mind.
2. Observe that Psalm 118:1, 29 are the same: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever." There are overtones of Genesis 1 through the Hebrew word *tob*, "good" (see Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The Lord is the Creator of the cosmos, and all that has ever been created. This is why the Lord's "mercy endures forever." His mercy transcends time.

3. Notice the key phrase, “For His mercy endures forever,” occurs in 118:1, 2, 3, 4, and 29. These phrases were repeated as part of the recitation of this psalm in worship. The word “mercy” is the Hebrew *chesed*, which is often translated “loving-kindness.” It is the language of covenant mercy.
4. Following the public recitation in worship (either by Levites or by all the worshipers), the Psalm moves to the human dilemma: “I called on the Lord in distress” (118:5). Notice the emphasis on the Lord’s response: the Lord answered me (v. 5); the Lord is on my side (v. 6), the Lord is for me (v. 7).
5. For our purposes in relation to Matthew 21, the psalm takes a Messianic turn in verses 19, 20: “Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the Lord. This is the gate [same Hebrew word as in v. 19] of the Lord, through which the righteous shall enter.” The idea of entering the “gates” implies moving from one place to another, the reality of change, of entering into the presence of the Lord. Also remember that the “gates” in ancient times were where judicial decisions were made (what we would call today city hall, or the courthouse). The Septuagint (LXX) word for *gates* is the same as used in Luke 7:12, where Jesus exercised authority at the city gates of Nain.<sup>3</sup>
6. Psalm 118:22-24 is also quoted in the New Testament. First, in light of our Matthew text, it is quoted in Matthew 21:42 and the parallels in Mark 12:10 and Luke 20:17 (all in reference to the last days of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem). It is also quoted in Acts 7:35 and 1 Peter 2:7 (see also 1 Pet. 2:4).
7. Psalm 118:25 introduces us to the “Hosanna” of Matthew 21:9, 15 (Mk. 11:9, 10; Jn. 12:13). The Hebrew text reads literally, “I beseech You Lord, save now,” and the first word, an interjection, can also be translated, “Ah, now, save us O Lord.” It’s the language of prayer. The LXX uses the Greek word *soson* (save) which is turned into *hosanna* in the NT texts (same meaning). Keep in mind that this typical Palm Sunday exclamation of prayer and praise is rooted in this portion of Psalm 118.
8. Psalm 118:26 is specifically cited in Matthew 21:9. More about this when we examine Matthew 21 below.

#### *Zechariah 9:9 – Key Points*

1. Zechariah 9:9 is quoted in Matthew 21:5. As you know, Matthew (the tax collector Levi), goes to great lengths to show the OT background of the words and actions of Jesus, as evidenced in Matthew 21:4: “All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying” (see this pattern in Matt. 1:22, 23; 2:15, 17, 18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4, 5; 27:9. There are additional formula related statements in 2:5, 6; 3:3; and 13:14, 15.)<sup>4</sup> I might add that a tax collector would likely be more detail oriented, much like an accountant today; thus, for Matthew, he wants to document more fully the OT references revealed to him by the Spirit as he followed the Risen Lord.
2. Hays observed that in the Matthew quotation of Zechariah 9:9, that Matthew has conflated a portion of Isaiah 62:11, “Say to daughter Zion” (LXX). The NKJV of Isaiah 62:11 reads,

“Say to the daughter of Zion, Surely your salvation is coming.”<sup>5</sup> You will see this pattern when below we see the Matthew citation of 21:5.

3. Zechariah 9:9 views the coming Messiah, the future King of Israel, coming into His kingdom as a humble leader, “lowly and riding on a donkey,” rather than a victorious warlord riding triumphantly on a warhorse. This contrast to the “warhorse” is seen in Zechariah 9:10, and it is combined with imagery from Daniel 7:14, 27 of the Lord’s “dominion . . . from seas to sea, and from the River (probably a reference to the Euphrates) to the ends of the earth.”
4. As a final note about this portion of Zechariah, be sure to read 9:11, 12 for insight into what the humble King Jesus will accomplish: “Because of the blood of your covenant, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope. Even today I declare that I will restore double to you.”

*Matthew 21:1-11 – Key Points*

1. The location is at the ancient village of Bethphage, near Bethany and the Mount of Olives. Those of you who have been to Jerusalem can visualize being near the top of the Mount of Olives and looking across the Kidron Valley to the eastern wall of Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> The walls that Jesus saw are not visible today (except at the Western Wall and the tunnels underneath). Regardless, the geography is essentially the same from the Mount of Olives looking westward across the Kidron Valley to the modern eastern wall. The then uncompleted temple of Herod would dominate the view of Jerusalem as viewed from the top and descent of the Mount of Olives.
2. We know from Matthew 20:29-34 that Jesus came from Jericho to where He had previously arranged for the donkey/colt to be available. Those of you who have been to Israel know that the road from Jericho to Jerusalem is about 18 miles and is a climb of over 3,300 feet.
3. In Jericho, Jesus had “a great multitude” who were with Him (20:29). Coming through the town Matthew has “two blind men sitting by the road” (20:30). They cried out, “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!” (20:30). Notice the “mercy” element from Psalm 118 (referenced above), and especially the Davidic kingship language. Healed by Jesus, these blind men joined the multitude taking the journey from Jericho to Bethany (20:34). The importance of the Davidic kingship language in Jericho shows us the Messianic fervor of the Jews and part of the background for the same language of the crowd in 21:9.
4. The scene in 21:2, 3 is interesting. It clearly indicates that Jesus, who often visited Bethany and often stayed there while visiting the Jerusalem area, had contacts and relationships with other people who were willing to serve Him. He had previously arranged that these animals and people be ready for His arrival. From a preaching standpoint you can focus on:
  - a. There are unknown people that Jesus is always using to accomplish His will.
  - b. Jesus will often ask us to be prepared to serve Him, though we may not know exactly when or why.
  - c. We should be ready to respond to the comment, “The Lord has need of them” (21:3).

5. Matthew's account refers to a donkey and a colt. In fact, in 21:7, Matthew describes Jesus as sitting on both of them. That's an almost comical picture of Jesus lifting up his robe and straddling two animals! More likely, Jesus rode them one at a time as He descended the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem, or one of the animals was used to carry more of the clothes that were thrown down along with the branches so that the feet of the King would not touch the ground. Notice that 21:9 indicates that multitudes went before Jesus and multitudes followed (perhaps picking up the clothes and placing them on one of the animals).
6. Earlier I noted from Psalm 118 that Hosanna would be used in Matthew 21:9. Here we have hosanna used in connection with the Son of David and the citation from Psalm 118:26, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."
7. The "triumphal entry" (see the comment earlier about the humility of the Lord on this journey) follows a path down from the Mount of Olives with Herod's Temple and the walls in clear view.<sup>7</sup> Luke 19:40-44 tells us of two things that occurred while Jesus approached towards Jerusalem:
  - a. When challenged for the crowd to cease the Davidic declarations, Jesus replied that the stones will cry out who He is.
  - b. Jesus saw the city and wept, even with the praise and adoration of the crowds, and prophesied the destruction of the city that would occur in 70 A.D.
8. The journey concluded in Jerusalem itself in the Temple area. It is likely that Jesus entered through the Eastern Gate, also called the Golden Gate, and in Hebrew called the Gate of Mercy (Psalm 118 reference!). The gate we see today was built and closed by Suleiman the Great. The gate Jesus entered, if it remains from the Roman destruction in 70 A.D., is below the present eastern side.
9. From John 12:17ff and from Matthew 21:10, 11, we know that multitudes in Jerusalem were enthralled by the "parade" from the Mount of Olives and the entrance into the Temple precincts. John 12 tells us that the Greeks wanted to see Jesus, thus focusing our attention on the spreading of the gospel to the Gentile world. Matthew 21 tells us that people wanted to know, "Who is this?" The answer came from the multitudes themselves, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." Keep in mind that Jesus is the Greek for the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which means "to deliver, to save."
10. One final comment before we leave the Matthew text. There is an interesting account in 2 Samuel 15:13ff where David flees Jerusalem by approximately the same route that Jesus took to enter Jerusalem (see 15:30 and the description of the Mount of Olives). David fled on foot (15:30) and his head is covered in lament and sorrow. David leaves and goes down to the area near Jericho and across the Jordan River. When he returns, he comes the same way that the Son of David will come nearly a thousand years later.

### Preaching Thoughts

1. One can easily preach and focus on any of the three primary texts discussed. If I were to focus on Psalm 118, I think I would focus on the themes of mercy associated with the

ministry of Jesus. Notice that Matt 20:30, 34 combines the cry for mercy with Jesus response based on compassion. That can be combined with thoughts about the Golden Gate that Jesus entered (the Gate of Mercy). Here are a few posts that might be of interest to you: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-temple-mountain-and-the-gate-of-no-mercy/>.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-for-over-1-000-years-j-lem-s-golden-gate-has-been-at-center-of-religious-conflicts-1.7046254>.

2. From Zechariah 9 your focus can connect to the themes later in the chapter related to setting prisoners free, prisoners of hope, etc. and the fact that Jesus continues to “ride in our midst.” In light of the fears and uncertainties that people are facing with the COVID-19 pandemic, this would certainly be an appropriate focus.
3. Finally, the Matthew text can be approached from a more traditional Palm Sunday focus, but with a number of different emphases. You can focus on the first part of the text where Jesus has unnamed people prepared to respond to His requests. You can focus on how Jesus as King is a different kind of king than the rulers of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.) 2005, and *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press) 2016. There are numerous writings from N.T. Wright, including N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic) 2019, and N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill) 2009. All these sources point to the strong connections to God's plan of salvation that began in the Old Testament (specifically with Abraham), worked its way through Israel to Jesus the Messiah, and its continuity in the one body of Christ of Jews and Gentiles. The point is well made that when New Testament writers are citing an Old Testament text, they often have the entire context of that passage in mind.

<sup>2</sup> Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospel*, p. 249 Kindle version (henceforth *Echoes*).

<sup>3</sup> The Septuagint is abbreviated LXX, which is the Roman numeral seventy. Tradition holds that there were seventy-two translators of the OT Hebrew into the Greek language somewhere in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. (250 BC). Throughout the New Testament, often the translations of OT Scripture are from the LXX rather than the Hebrew text (often called the Masoretic text).

<sup>4</sup> Hays, *Echoes*, p. 107 Kindle Version.

<sup>5</sup> Hays, *Echoes*, p. 152 Kindle Version.

<sup>6</sup> Remember the walls of Jerusalem we see today are from the time of Sultan Suleiman I, also called the Magnificent, who had these walls built between 1537-1541.

<sup>7</sup> These walls are part of a progression of walls from the Maccabean Period to the time and improvements under Herod the Great, prior to Jesus' ministry. See <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/israelexperience/history/pages/jerusalem%20-%20the%20upper%20city%20during%20the%20second%20templ.aspx>.