

# “Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord”

## The Thirty-Third in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 11:1-19; Zechariah 9:9-13*

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Their journey south from Capernaum now complete, Jesus and his disciples have finally arrived in Jerusalem. Israel’s Messiah has at long last come to that city which is the apple of God’s eye. Jerusalem is also that place where the Messiah—Israel’s prophet, priest and king—will be received by his people in a joyful celebration marking the dawn of the messianic age. But the joyful choruses of “Hosanna” and the antiphonal chant of the messianic refrain “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” will be short-lived. Make no mistake about it, not only is Jesus fulfilling a number of messianic prophecies when he enters Jerusalem, but the final showdown between Jesus and the Sanhedrin (the religious leadership of Israel) has begun. The members of the Sanhedrin will oppose Jesus’ messianic mission with everything in them. They will soon hatch a plot to have Jesus killed, and in doing so, ensure that Jesus dies as a ransom for our sins—the very thing Jesus had predicted. The wrath of men against the Son of God is about to become the means by which the Son of God turns aside his father’s wrath towards his people.

We return to our series on the Gospel of Mark. We have reached that point in Mark’s account when Jesus and his disciples have at long last reached Jerusalem. From this point forward (Mark 11), until the end of the gospel (Mark 16), Jesus’ ministry takes place in and around the city. As we have previously seen, Mark sets forth a number of critical moments in the ministry of Jesus and in the lives of the apostles. Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is yet another one these critical turning points, this time setting the stage for the so-called “Passion” of our Lord—the “Passion” being a reference to the final week of our Lord’s earthly ministry in which Jesus suffers and dies for our sins, before he is raised from the dead.

In Mark chapter 11, Mark focuses upon Jesus’ prophetic ministry as Jesus speaks the word of blessing and curse to Israel, while in chapter 12, Mark describes the opposition Jesus receives from the members of the Sanhedrin. Then, in chapter 13, Mark recounts Jesus’ teaching about the future course of redemptive history (the so-called Olivet Discourse). Mark 14 deals with the Last Supper, Peter’s denial of Jesus, Jesus’ betrayal by Judas and his arrest and appearance before the Sanhedrin, while chapter 15 deals with Jesus’ appearance before Pilate, before recounting his death and burial. As the gospel comes to a close in chapter sixteen, we have the account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Mark packs a great deal of material into these closing chapters as the ministry of Jesus comes to its completion.

Even though it will take us some time to cover these momentous events, we must keep in mind that these things originally occurred in the span of just one week.<sup>1</sup> While we must plod along through these final chapters because of time limitations and because of the need to reflect upon the important things which Jesus says and does, the events which we will be discussing in the next several months unfold at a breakneck pace—a point we should keep in mind as we proceed. It is also important to keep in mind that

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in Lane to the effect that this period of time may indeed be more than a single week, perhaps a period as long as six months. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 390-391. Cranfield argues that the messianic significance of this would not have been noticed by the crowds, despite Jesus’ deliberate actions in fulfilling prophecy. I’m not convinced. (Cf. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 352-354).

Jesus has predicted many of these events which occur in these final chapters of Mark, and they will be fulfilled with a remarkable accuracy. Not only did Jesus predict these things as he and the disciples make the journey to Jerusalem, a number of these events were already predicted throughout the Old Testament, foretold hundreds of years before Jesus fulfilled them. Not only does fulfilled prophecy prove to the religious leaders of Israel that Jesus is the one predicted in the Old Testament—leaving them without excuse for their rejection of their own Messiah—but fulfilled prophecy is also one of strongest arguments for the truth of Christianity. That Jesus fulfills a number of specific predictions written hundreds of years beforehand is compelling evidence that Christianity is true.

Recall too that when Jesus and his disciples left Capernaum for the last time, Jesus indicated to them that he was taking them to Jerusalem to fulfill his messianic mission. These men were not on vacation. They were not tourists. They were on a mission from God—literally. As we saw in the closing words of Mark 10, when Jesus healed the blind man (Bartimaeus) in Jericho, this act fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 29:18-19 which foretold that the deaf will hear and the meek will obtain joy in the Lord when the messianic age unfolds.<sup>2</sup> The crowds which had gathered when Jesus entered the city, knew where Jesus was headed. They were excited by the fact that Jesus would soon become Israel's king and many decided to follow Jesus and his disciples the eighteen miles up the road to Jerusalem. Since the Jewish people hated their Roman occupiers, and for the most part distrusted and disliked the Sanhedrin, their hopes were now centered in Jesus. Maybe Jesus was the Messiah after all and maybe there really were better days ahead for Israel.

It is important to put this journey to Jerusalem into its historical and theological context. Jesus and his disciples were not the only ones headed to Jerusalem at this time. Jewish pilgrims from all over Israel would have been making the same journey so as to get to Jerusalem in time to celebrate the Passover. The roads and inns would have been crowded. There can be no question that Jesus picked this time to enter the city because he was the true Passover lamb, that one to whom the entire national celebration pointed. Yes, Jesus could have also chosen to enter the city quietly. He could have entered the city during some other time of year. Instead, Jesus allows the people join his procession into the city and he allows them to chant “Hosanna” in reference to him. Jesus willingly receives the adulation of the crowds who saw in this day the fulfillment of everything promised to Israel in the Old Testament.

This was truly a day, then, in which events of biblical proportions were unfolding before their very eyes. This is why it is so important to understand the fact that Jesus' actions constituted “a blatant public act which effectively throw[s] down the gauntlet to the Jerusalem authorities and force[s] them to respond.”<sup>3</sup> Mark does not describe a Jesus who sees these events as an opportunity which he can use to his advantage. Rather, Jesus is directing all of these things, bringing them to their appointed ends, since this all points to him and to the events of this day. Jesus is the Lord of history. He is not an opportunist, taking advantage of the circumstances at hand. Jesus picks this time and this means of entering the city because these things find their meaning only in him. Jesus allows the adulation of the crowds because he is Israel's Messiah and because Scripture must be fulfilled.

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<sup>2</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 392-393.

<sup>3</sup> France, The Gospel of Mark, 427-428.

**W**e now turn to our text this morning, the first nineteen verses of Mark 11, which describes Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what has come to be known as Palm Sunday.

In verse 1, the scene switches from the city of Jericho to an area near Jerusalem after Jesus and his disciples covered the eighteen miles and ascended the 2600 foot climb from Jericho to Jerusalem. We read, "*as they approached Jerusalem [they] came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives.*" Bethany, was a small village, two miles outside of Jerusalem. The route they would have taken passed through the Kidron Valley on the Eastern side of Jerusalem. This is the valley below that familiar scene of the Temple mount, which taken from the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. According to Mark, "*Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'*" There is profound messianic significance in these words and we need to unpack some of the things involved in Jesus' instructions.

When Jesus sends two of the twelve ahead into the village of Bethphage to find a young donkey colt, Jesus begins to identify his actions with the fulfillment a number of Old Testament passages—some messianic, some not seen as messianic until Jesus applies them to himself. That the disciples would find a young colt which had never been ridden has a significance which is easily lost to us who are not familiar with the customs of the ancient near east. Any animal which was to be used for a sacred purposes must never have been previously used in its ordinary role—in the case, this young donkey as a beast of burden. Such an animal was to be set aside for special usage. Not only is this practice mentioned in several Old Testament texts (i.e., Numbers 19:2, Deuteronomy 21:3), but in choosing such an animal in this particular way Jesus is applying messianic prophecy to himself and fulfilling it.

One passage which comes to mind is the oracle of Judah in Genesis 49:11, in which Jacob tells his sons that a descendant of Judah will "*will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.*" According to the oracle of Judah, it will be someone from the tribe of Judah who will tether his young colt in preparation to shed blood for the remission of sin, as in the manner of a priest. The very act of untying the young colt is itself a messianic sign.<sup>4</sup> Either Jesus had made arrangements of the owner of the animal to do this (demonstrating his purpose to fulfill this prophecy), or else this is an expression of the Lord's omniscience—Jesus knew that the animal would be there. In any case, the disciples are to respond to anyone who questions them about what they are doing that Jesus has need of this particular animal. When they arrive in Bethphage, things are exactly as Jesus told them they would be. "*They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, 'What are you doing, untying that colt?' They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.*"

The disciples brought the animal to back Jesus. As we read in verse 7, "*when they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it.*" With that act, a spontaneous and joyful celebration broke out among the bystanders and the pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem, all along the remaining distance from Bethany to Jerusalem. The scene suddenly takes on the image of a royal procession and a coronation. We read in verses 8-10, "*many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!'*"

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<sup>4</sup> France, The Gospel According to Mark, 395.

*‘Hosanna in the highest!’*”

The spreading of cloaks on Jesus’ path recalls the royal salute given to Jehu in 2 Kings 9:12 ff. This is the same thing as laying out a red carpet for a dignitary. The cutting of Palm branches and the loud singing recalls the entrance of Simon into Jerusalem during the time of the Maccabees, some two centuries before.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the well-known messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9—“*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,*” is being fulfilled before their very eyes. Just as the prophet had predicted six centuries before, the time has come for Zion (Jerusalem) to rejoice, because the Messiah has come to his city, riding not the steed of war, but on the back of one of the least regarded beasts of burden—a young donkey. Not what you’d expect for a king about to enter his city, but then this was what the Old Testament predicted.

The people who accompanied Jesus, or who were watching Jesus pass by, were chanting the words of a Hallel Psalm (i.e., Psalm 118:25-26) in which the people were crying out “Hosanna,” or “save us now!” The Hallel Psalms were recited at major festivals in Jerusalem. But the hosannas of these Psalms are used here in a jubilant sense along the lines of “Hallelujah.” What had been a greeting addressed to someone entering the temple, is now applied directly to Jesus.<sup>6</sup> He, as Israel’s Messiah, has truly come in the name of the Lord. He has come to save his people. The crowd senses that his appearance on this day, in this way, means that the messianic kingdom—the coming kingdom of our father David—is about to become a reality for Israel. The people are joyful, sensing something dramatic was about to happen which would change their futures forever. They chant yet again “Hosanna in the highest.” They understood that this was an appeal for God to bring about the promised age of salvation.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, even as they chanted these words, God was doing exactly that! This was the greatest day in Israel’s history.

But according to Mark, the messianic celebration ended almost as suddenly as it began. The people immediately dispersed once Jesus entered the city. Mark tells us in verse 11 that “*Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.*” There are probably a number of reasons why the celebration ended so rapidly. It was late in the day and people were probably tired, especially if they had traveled the eighteen miles to Jericho that day. There was certainly great pressure from both the Sanhedrin and from the Roman army for celebration to end once Jesus had entered the city. The members of the Sanhedrin hated the adulation poured out upon Jesus. They wanted it to stop. The Roman garrison wanted to keep the peace, period. Roman military officials could care less about Jewish religious celebrations. They had no understanding of who Jesus was, or what the excitement was all about. All they knew is that Jesus’ appearance created a great deal of tension in the city and they wanted the hubbub to stop.

Mark recounts what Jesus and his disciples did after entering the city—they went to the temple. That Jesus went to the temple is not to be understood as though he and the disciples were tourists and that they went to check out all the sights in the city. Rather we must understand that Jesus went to the temple in direct fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, where the prophet declares, “*See, I will send my messenger, who will*

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<sup>5</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 396.

<sup>6</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 434.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 398.

*prepare the way before me.*” Malachi’s reference to a messenger is, of course, a reference to John the Baptist. The prophecy continues. “*Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*’ says the LORD Almighty.” Once the messenger, John, has come, the Messiah’s appearance is inevitable. Mark’s point is that Jesus has come to his temple to fulfill prophecy, not as part of a tourist’s visit of the city.

**H**aving gone to the temple, Jesus and his disciples then left the city and returned the two miles to Bethany, where they would stay for the next several days, while Jesus went about his business in Jerusalem. The next incident recounted by Mark is one of the most interesting in all the gospels, Jesus cursing the fig tree.

The fact that Jesus performs a miracle which is destructive seems out of character from all the other miracles in the gospels, and has given commentators fits. But as we will see, there is a perfectly straightforward and simple explanation as to why Jesus would do this.<sup>8</sup> As we read in verses 12-14, “*the next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard him say it.*” Mark informs us that Jesus is hungry and that he uses the occasion of looking for food to instruct his disciples about the true spiritual condition of Israel. Jesus knew that while the tree was covered with leaves, it was not the season for figs. In effect, he is giving a living parable, acting out the principle parts of the story. We also need to know that throughout the Old Testament, the fig tree is used by the prophets as a symbol of Israel. A fruitful tree is a sign of blessing and obedience, while a tree without fruit is a sign of Israel’s poor spiritual condition (cf. Jeremiah 8:13; 29:17; Hosea 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7; and Micah 7:1-6). Furthermore, the prophets speak of the destruction of the fig tree as a metaphor for judgment upon Israel (Hosea 2:12; Isaiah 34:4).<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, when Jesus approaches the fig tree, he is using that tree as a tangible symbol of Israel’s current spiritual condition just like the prophets had done. When Jesus curses the tree, he is showing what lies ahead for the city of Jerusalem and its temple—something unpacked by Jesus in great detail in Mark 13. The fig tree had many leaves (an apparent sign of vitality), but had no fruit (there was no substance). The Israelites thought that the glories of the temple and the sacrifices that took place there, was the sign that God blessed the people because of their national righteousness. But Jesus now uses the tree to make the point that what is visible and the reality behind it, are two different things. There are leaves, but there is no fruit. There is a temple, a priesthood and sacrifices, there is a Sanhedrin, but there is no sign of true righteousness. Jesus is not mad at the fig tree because he’s hungry and the tree has no fruit. Rather, Jesus is speaking as a prophet and telling his disciples in the most graphic of terms (an acted out parable) that because there is no true righteousness in the land, Jerusalem and its temple will soon come under the judgment of God. In fact, as we will see next time, in Mark 11:20-21, Peter sees the tree later on and it is completely withered. Jerusalem and the temple are about to come under God’s curse. When the disciples heard Jesus say this, they are stunned. We’ll talk more about this when we work our way through the balance of this chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> See the discussion in: Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 355-357.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 400.

The next incident which Mark describes also centers around the righteous anger of Jesus. This time, Jesus will drive the merchants from the temple and proclaim that the temple's true purpose is to serve as a house of prayer, not as a den of thieves.

At the time Jesus entered Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Temple (the so-called "second temple," the rebuilt temple of Solomon) was the most magnificent structure in all the Middle East. In its splendor, it rivaled anything found in Greece, Rome, or Egypt. The temple lay at the heart of Jewish the nation. It was not only the religious center of the land and that place where Jewish pilgrims flocked for the various feasts, but the temple was also the symbol of the nation's political and historical life. The temple was everything to Jews at the time of Jesus. So much so, the temple had actually become a stumbling block to faith in YHWH.<sup>10</sup> If the people had such a glorious temple, why do they need a Savior? People relied upon the temple and its ceremonies, not upon YHWH's grace and mercy. It was thought that to possess such a magnificent temple, was to possess the righteousness and blessing of God. Not true.

At time of Jesus, there were four marketplaces on the slopes of the Mount of Olives in which pilgrims could purchase doves and other objects for sacrifice in the temple during a pilgrimage. But these were so successful that additional markets had also been opened within the outer court of the temple itself, the so-called "Court of the Gentiles." The presence of these markets in and around the temple indicates that this was a kind of religious business that gradually grew and spread, although it was never officially sanctioned. In fact, there is some evidence that these markets were originally opened by Caiaphas, the current high priest when Jesus entered the city, some forty years before Jesus arrived in Jerusalem about A.D. 30.<sup>11</sup> All of that is to say, this was now a thriving business (centered in selling objects to be sacrificed in the temple), and was certainly tolerated (if not sanctioned) by the Sanhedrin, some of whose members may have profited from this lucrative business. Jesus saw this as nothing but blasphemy.

As we read in verses 15-17, "*on reaching Jerusalem,*" [on the second day—i.e., Monday] "*Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts.*" The whole ugly specter of people conducting business within the confines of the temple itself, demonstrated a complete and utter disregard for the honor of God and for the sanctity of the temple. That place designated so that Gentiles could freely approach Israel's God to pray and seek forgiveness, had instead become what one writer calls a "bazaar and cattle mart."<sup>12</sup> How could the Sanhedrin just look the other way and allow the outer court to become profaned, so that merchants could profit from the sacrifices which pilgrims sought to make? Jesus will have none of it.

Reminiscent of Phinehas, who, as recounted in Numbers 25:6-12, drove a spear through an Israelite male and Midianite woman who were mocking the law of God before all Israel at the very moment when Moses was summoning the people of Israel to repentance, Jesus similarly reacts with righteous anger to the sight of the merchants in the temple. In Jesus' case, the Lord himself had come to his temple seeking to cleanse it, only to find its outer court filled with the stalls of merchants, making a buck off those who came to the temple to seek forgiveness for their sins. In all three synoptic gospel, we read that Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 392.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 404.

<sup>12</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 406.

physically [*ekballein*] drove out these merchants from the temple with as much force as he could muster.<sup>13</sup> Jesus also demanded that the practice stop and he forbade people from carrying this merchandise around within the temple. This could not stand.

Citing Isaiah 56:7, Jesus declares in verse 17, “*as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’*” The temple had been built, complete with its outer court dedicated to the Gentiles, for the specific purpose that it be a house of prayer. The so-called Court of the Gentiles was to be that place where the nations, not just the Jews, could approach YHWH and seek his will and to praise his name. By this time, the Jews had so little regard for the Gentiles that it was filled with merchants, preventing its proper usage. The house of prayer had become a den of thieves. Jesus had every right to drive out the merchants and restore the temple to its proper purpose and holiness. In doing this Jesus was fulfilling prophecy. The Messiah had come to his temple and he would restore it to its proper purpose.

Surely, Jesus knew that his effort to cleanse the temple will become the spark which leads to his arrest and crucifixion just days later. It was one thing to criticize the Sanhedrin, it was another to hit them in the wallet. Jesus was a threat to everything the Sanhedrin now stood for. And so “*the chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city.*”

**W**hat, then, do we say by way of application?

The one thing that becomes apparent throughout Mark’s account of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem is that Jesus’ actions are said (and implied) to fulfill a number of Old Testament prophecies written hundreds of years in advance. This does two things. First, it leaves the members of the Sanhedrin under the condemnation of those messianic prophecies which they think their own zeal for the law has fulfilled. But it is Jesus, not they, who have God’s blessing. Jesus brings the messianic kingdom. The Sanhedrin has not established it through their self-righteous zeal. If these men reject Jesus, they can only do so by rejecting all of the evidence God gave to prove that Jesus is who he claimed to be. The members of the Sanhedrin must willingly harden their hearts and reject what they know to be true. They are without any excuse for their actions. Their behavior will be the reason *why* God will lift his hand of protection from Jerusalem and the temple, allowing the Romans to destroy them both. That the members of the Sanhedrin did not join in the messianic processional and welcome their own Messiah by singing “*blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*” is a tragic thing. It will soon lead to even greater tragedy.

The second thing Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy does is give everyone here this morning inescapable evidence that Christianity is true. The foundation of the Christian faith is not that Christianity is the best religion, or that Christianity gives us inner peace, or even that it meets our personal needs and changes our lives—although Jesus will certainly change our lives once we trust in him. The most important reason why we are Christians is because Christianity is true. Jesus really did enter Jerusalem and fulfill all these prophecies. In fact, our entire religion stands or falls upon the fact that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” Either God did these things to save us from our sins, or he did not. If Jesus fulfills messianic prophecy in such exacting detail, and if you are not a Christian, it can only be because you are doing the same thing the Sanhedrin did—you are rejecting what you know to be true. You don’t want to

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<sup>13</sup> France, The Gospel of Mark, 444.

believe. You are rejecting that same Jesus, who has given you all the evidence you will ever need to trust in him. Never forget that to sing “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” is to sing that Jesus alone was worthy to come to his city, and enter his temple, and receive the praise of God’s people. Jesus is blessed because he was the Messiah, and because he was fulfilling prophecy “in the name of the Lord.” Reject him if you will, but reject him to your own peril. But just know that Jesus did all of this to save us from our sins! And the reason we sing hosanna to him, is because he saves from our sins!