

# WHAT REALLY HAPPENED ON THAT FIRST PALM SUNDAY?

*SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST*

by Ron Ritchie

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On May 22, a Friday afternoon, my wife Anne Marie, Carl Gallivan, and I drove from Strasbourg, France across the Rhine river into Germany and then north through Heidelberg and on for another fifty miles, then east to the small mountain village of Reicheishelm, Germany. Here we were to meet our German host, a young Lutheran pastor named Wolfgang Breithaupt, and a group of Ukrainian engineers at a Christian retreat center. Ray Cookingham was to arrive later that evening from Frankfurt.

Shortly after our arrival Wolfgang came to our lodging to meet all of us. I had been introduced to Wolfgang last year by mail through a German friend of his who visited PBC. I had asked Wolfgang to pray about having our two staffs minister together somewhere in the Eastern Bloc countries. Wolfgang had been ministering faithfully among his own people under communist rule until the Berlin wall came down, and this opened some doors of ministry with the Ukrainian people. As a result of those relationships, he was able to put together a three-week conference between eastern and western businessmen and businesswomen so that they could share marketing ideas as the Ukrainians rebuilt their nation. Wolfgang remembered my request, and we made arrangements through Carl on one of his European business trips so that our team could join up with Wolfgang's team on the second weekend of the conference. Wolfgang told us that fourteen nuclear engineers who were part of the middle management of a Ukrainian nuclear power plant had showed up to interface with the west for the first time in their lives.

As we got acquainted with these people, we recognized the following: (1) Politically, they had been held captive for some seventy years by humanist philosophy. These nuclear engineers and their families had even been physically held captive within the borders of a "secret city" until two years ago because of their work at the nuclear power plant. (2) Religiously, they lived in an atheistic nation that had rejected God and his Son Jesus Christ, and they were being held captive by a church that had all the ritual but that rejected the power of our risen Lord and Savior. (3) Socially, most of them were being held captive by the flesh with its memories of the horrors that took place between the Germans and the Ukrainians during World War II; families on both sides of that conflict were still feeling the effects emotionally. Finally, of course, they endured the captivity of the world, the flesh and the devil.

I mention these events because the experience that our team had in Germany of trying to present the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel of peace to the Ukrainians in a small way had many of the problems and pressures that our Lord faced when he rode into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. As we turn to Luke 19:28-44, we will find our Lord preparing himself to ride into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday as the Prince of Peace in order to establish peace with God and offer his people the possibility of experiencing that peace as they placed their faith in him as their Messiah-King. And in that setting the following was true: (1) Politically, the Jewish people had been held captive by the Roman Empire for decades. (2) Religiously, the spiritual leadership had wrongly used the Law of Moses to keep the people captive. (3) Socially, the nation was being held captive by its hatred of the Romans, Samaritans, Gentiles, and even each other, as well as by its self-righteousness.

As we study Luke 19:28-44 we want to ask, "What really happened on that first Palm Sunday?" and then to see the redeeming value these events have in our lives today, regardless of our political, religious, or social backgrounds.

Let's look first at the time of preparation in verses 28-34:

And after He had said these things, He was going on ahead, ascending to Jerusalem.

And it came about that when He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is

called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village opposite you, in which as you enter you will find a colt tied, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it, and bring it here. And if anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' thus shall you speak, 'The Lord has need of it.'" And those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" And they said, "The Lord has need of it."

Now when Luke presented his book to Theophilus he divided the life and ministry of Jesus Christ into five sections: (1) Our Lord's birth and maturity 1:1-2:52, (2) our Lord's preparation for ministry in 3:1-4:13, (3) our Lord's Galilean ministry in 4:14-9:50, (4) our Lord's Judean and Perea ministry in 9:51-19:27, and finally (5) our Lord's passion and triumph in 19:28-24:53, which we are beginning today. The theme of Luke's gospel, which rises to a crescendo in this chapter, is given to us in the words of Jesus to Zaccheus, the repentant tax collector of Jericho, just before Jesus went up to Jerusalem to become the final sacrificial lamb of God who would be slain at Passover to cover the sins of humanity: "Today salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." As a result of that statement, the crowd "...supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately." (Luke 19:9-11.) So there was tension in the air-Messiah was coming! The faithful were excited, but the Pharisees were very nervous as they sought a way to arrest him (see John 11:57).

Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethany, just two miles east of Jerusalem, six days before Passover, which would have been a Sabbath. According to my harmony of the gospels, after sunset he was invited to the home of Simon the leper, where he met with the risen Lazarus and was served a meal by his sisters. After supper Mary anointed his feet with expensive burial oil, although she did not realize all that God would accomplish in the life and death of his Son during his final Passover feast. At the same time many of his disciples from Galilee were arriving in Jerusalem a week early in order to prepare for the Passover feast.

The next day, a Sunday, as our Lord began to walk toward Jerusalem he sent two of his disciples into the next village, where they would find a donkey colt that no one had ever ridden. They were to untie it and bring it to the Lord. If they were questioned, they were to say, "The Lord has need of it; and immediately he will send it back here." (See Mark 11:3.) So the owners, who may have been disciples of Jesus, gave them permission to take the colt based on some previous arrangement.

The colt was an important symbol of our Lord's overall plan to officially present himself to the nation not only as the Messiah-King, but also as their prophetically promised Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). He would also fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, as we will see in a moment. But keep in mind that while Jesus was preparing to present himself to the nation as the long-awaited King of Israel and Savior of mankind, the chief priests were preparing to take counsel to seize and kill him (John 12:13).

The Scriptures are full of stories about how God took the time to prepare the hearts of people to hear the truth about himself and his Son. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son...." (Galatians 4:4.) Here our God was using the Jewish symbols of a Passover feast, a sacrificial lamb, and an unbroken colt to help them understand that he was presenting his Son to the nation and the world. The spiritual leadership of Israel wouldn't accept him as the King of Israel or the King of kings, but eventually they would accept him as the Passover Lamb.

When I think back over all the planning that went on behind the scenes for our trip to Germany, I am overwhelmed. There were so many phone calls, faxes, plane tickets, rental cars, maps, hotels, meals, money exchanges, Bibles, and gifts that had to be in place before any of us even arrived. Then many prayers from this body, the German Lutheran Church, and the retreat staff took place so that over a four-day period our team of four could merge with the German team of five and the retreat staff. God was bringing people together, weaving a tapestry, and we didn't know what it was going to look like, but it was all so that fourteen Ukrainian nuclear engineers would have an opportunity to see, feel, and hear about the love of God and his Son Jesus Christ. This trip was a beautiful reminder that there is great godly preparation for the redemption of each one of us.

What really happened on that first Palm Sunday? God's preparation of the hearts of the nation of Israel to receive their Messiah-Redeemer and King, which took place over centuries, culminated on this day.

Next we see the disciples welcome their King in Luke 19:35-38:

And they brought it to Jesus, and they threw their garments on the colt, and put Jesus on it. And as He was going, they were spreading their garments in the road. And as He was now approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, saying,

"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord;  
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Remember, the little village of Bethany was just two miles east of Jerusalem, which was filled with disciples who had come early for the Passover feast. Having settled in, they heard that Jesus was staying with Mary, Martha, and the resurrected Lazarus. So many made the short journey up to Bethany. It was this crowd of believers that was available to follow Jesus as he rode on a colt into Jerusalem. So once the colt arrived the disciples "...threw their garments on the colt, and put Jesus on it." And as our Lord was placed on the colt, the prophecy of Zechariah, written some five hundred years earlier, was about to be fulfilled to the letter when Jesus presented himself to the nation as the Prince of Peace with the offer of spiritual salvation. Zechariah 9:9:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Keep in mind that the Jews were continually hoping that Messiah would come to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, but down through the years the focus of that hope moved more and more toward the restoration of Israel and its glory rather than their need of a savior. What the disciples had in mind was that the one who was able to raise Lazarus from the dead could defeat the Romans. Thus as they went through the motions of bowing their knees under the heavy hand of Rome, their hearts were filled with the picture of a warrior king on a great white horse, followed by a large army that would overthrow the hated Roman Empire, in somewhat the same spirit as that of King David some one thousand years earlier when he destroyed the Philistines. They kept watering down what the Messiah would be like. So you can imagine the confusion on the part of some Jews when they saw that their possible Messiah was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey colt. For the Jews understood the symbolic nature of this act. They saw this donkey as a lowly but noble beast, knowing that if a king wanted to approach a city in peace he would ride up to the gates on a young donkey instead of on a war horse. At this time Jesus Christ was preparing for the first time during his ministry to be declared the King of Israel, the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of David, and he was going to enter Jerusalem, the city of peace, not as a warrior messiah who would physically conquer the Roman army, but as the prophetic Prince of Peace who would seek to conquer the spiritual hearts of the people.

As our Lord began his two-mile journey from Bethany toward Jerusalem, the crowds began to grow. The Jews of Bethany coming down the hill were merging with the Galilean believers who were coming out of Jerusalem to visit Jesus in Bethany and witness the miracle of the resurrected Lazarus (see John 12:17-18). This latter crowd took the branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, and as they approached the Mount of Olives, which overlooked the "Golden Gate" that opened the way to the steps of the Temple, "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully," singing a Passover song taken from the messianic Psalm 118:26. They skipped over verses 22-25, in which we find the words:

The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief corner stone.  
This is the LORD's doing,  
It is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day which the LORD has made;  
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
O LORD, do save, we beseech Thee...

But they picked out verse 26 as they sang:

Hosanna to the Son of David [see Matthew 21:9];  
Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord;  
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.

Clearly the crowds were proclaiming the hope of the restoration of the kingdom of David at this time, implying deliverance from the yoke of Rome and Israel's re-establishment as a great and independent nation. As the people saw it, God was at peace with the human race, particularly with Israel, and in turn they shouted with joy to God for his grace toward them. Yet during all this religious activity and excitement, they were missing the whole point of our Lord's humble entrance into Jerusalem. He was coming to offer personal salvation, which in turn would indeed have brought blessings to Israel as a nation so that Israel would once again be a light of truth to the other nations of the world. Societies are changed when the hearts of the people are changed and filled with the righteousness of God through his Son Jesus Christ.

Crucified for our sins, buried, and then raised from the dead and declared Lord of lords by our heavenly Father, Jesus is still willing to offer to anyone living under any corrupt political, social, or religious system the gift of salvation whenever they are willing to call out to him in faith.

I saw a beautiful example of this on our trip to Germany. As soon as we all arrived at the German retreat center, Wolfgang told us that the Ukrainians who had been at the retreat center for some two weeks were still suffering some culture shock but were very eager to meet us, hoping that western business practices and ideas would somehow save their country. Finally that evening we all met and had a good time being introduced to each other. The next day Ray, Carl, and others shared some good ideas about western business philosophies, but at the same time they kept reminding the Ukrainians of their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Ray told them, "I work for Hewlett-Packard, but I want you to know that Jesus is my Lord, and that really flavors how I do business, which means I seek to do it with the integrity of Christ." Carl Gallivan and others said the same thing. You could see the Ukrainians struggling with the spiritual concepts that were coming out in our conversations, especially when we came to the question-and-answer times.

One of the men who was really listening was our German translator. When we first arrived he stepped out of the crowd immediately, walked up to me, and said, "I know you by your every word. I was the man who translated your letters to Wolfgang from English to German. My name is Christoph, and I am going to be your Russian translator, but you need to know that I am fifty-two years old and you are the first American I have ever met." We later found out that he had been the main translator for the Communist party in East Germany and had been greatly restricted in travel because he knew too much. The following day Christoph decided to attend an unscheduled worship service the Americans put on for the Ukrainians and Germans. Here sat a man who had lived some fifty years under communism, holding a Bible and listening to a teaching from Romans 10:9-10. After the service he came up to me and Wolfgang, his friend and a pastor who did not know where he was spiritually, and said, "You are the first people I am willing to tell about my faith in Jesus. I became a Christian in a hospital bed on August 13, 1980, and now because of what you taught in this service you may tell all of America that I am a Christian."

What really happened on that first Palm Sunday? Jesus prepared to enter the city on a lowly but noble donkey as the prophetic Prince of Peace and King-Messiah, and some accepted him as their spiritual King, but now we will see that the Pharisees rejected their King. Let's read on in Luke 19:39-40:

And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples."  
And He answered and said, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!"

He was saying, "Don't you understand? This is the moment that God my Father has been preparing since the foundation of the world for you to have your Messiah. I am officially here. And if I stop my disciples from singing Psalm 118, then you're going to hear a literal rock concert!"

Many of the Pharisees who were blinded by a religious system that promoted power, fear, jealousy, and greed had been plotting to seize the Lord without arousing the crowds. Some of them watching the parade pass by and hearing the many disciples singing praises to God, cried out to Jesus as he rode by them, "Teacher [not Lord], rebuke your disciples." This was the moment when the leadership rejected Jesus as their Messiah. They were saying, "These people are calling you 'King of Israel' when we all know that there is only one king, and that is Caesar." The corrupt spiritual leaders knew that if Pilate heard about this demonstration, which had all the markings of a political revolt, and everyone believed in Jesus, then the Romans would come and take away both their temple and their nation (John 11:48). But Jesus replied, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" Jesus approved the people's seeking to proclaim him their Messiah and King, although he knew that most of them wanted him to conquer their enemies and rule their land rather than their hearts.

There is religious ritual and there is spiritual reality, and the two will never mix. To become a follower of mere religious ritual will result in spiritual death. To become a believer in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior will result in spiritual life.

I saw this dichotomy as well on our trip. During the unscheduled worship service I mentioned a moment ago, the leader of the Ukrainian group was listening to me teach about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For some reason he suddenly felt compelled to share with the Germans, Americans, and his fellow Russians the whole Easter ritual of the Russian Orthodox Church. He eventually stood up and showed us how he kissed the ground and then the altar of the church, and so forth. This went on for about ten minutes. Then he proudly sat down, but there was death in his eyes. I thanked him and continued to show from the Scriptures that God is not pleased with any ritual that does not come out of the heart of a true believer in Jesus Christ. I pointed to two girls from the serving staff who had come in and said, "See these two people? They have recently accepted Jesus Christ into their hearts, and he is ruling their lives, and they are being led by the Spirit of God, not by ritual. If you go all through that ritual and do it right, if the Holy Spirit is within you and Christ is reigning in your life, it comes out of a true heart. But to have ritual without Christ as Lord and Messiah is death."

What really happened on that first Palm Sunday? Jesus prepared to enter Jerusalem, and the disciples welcomed him as their long-awaited King and Messiah, but the Pharisees were greatly shaken by the political and personal upheaval this demonstration could cause for them. Finally, we see that as the Messiah-King and Prophet looked over the crowds, it caused him to weep over Jerusalem. Look at Luke 19:41-44:

And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation."

As our Lord approached the city gates in the midst of the crowds of singing disciples and onlookers, his heart was broken because he saw the heart of the majority of the people that he came to love, and already they had rejected him and all the blessings he was to bring. So now it was time for judgment. The things that make for peace were hidden from their eyes because of unbelief.

What did Jesus mean by "in this day?" Some five hundred years earlier an angel had appeared to the prophet Daniel and told him of certain dramatic events to be marked off on God's timetable that would affect Israel directly as well as the surrounding nations indirectly. They would all occur in what is now known as the

seventy weeks as recorded in Daniel 9:24-27. The seventy weeks would begin with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under the decree of the Persian King Artaxerxes in 445 BC. Over the next sixty-nine weeks, Jerusalem would be restored and rebuilt until the Messiah the Prince would come but would be cut off. In Daniel's great prophecy of the seventy weeks, God had revealed the specific time in which Messiah would be presented to the nation Israel. Although the nation was unmindful of the divine timetable, Christ was obviously conscious that this day in which he made his entry into Jerusalem was the specific day foretold by Daniel in which he was to present himself to Israel as their Messiah-King, their Prince of Peace. Everything was right on schedule-to the day! (Concerning the exact day of Christ's entrance into the city of Jerusalem see "The Words and Works of Jesus Christ," J. Dwight Pentecost, pages 374-376).

What are the things that make for peace? Here was sitting on this colt the Prince of Peace, and he was offering eternal spiritual peace: reconciliation between God and man (Romans 5) and reconciliation among men.

Jesus, the prophet of Deuteronomy 18, foretold the fall of Jerusalem. Because the nation rejected the blessing of God through Christ, they would have to experience the judgment of God. "For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will [1] throw up a bank before you, and [2] surround you, and [3] hem you in on every side, and [4] will level you to the ground and [5] your children within you, and [6] they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." All this would come true some thirty-seven years later under the Roman General Titus in seventy AD. And the prophecy has a double fulfillment: It will happen to Jerusalem again during the tribulation under the Antichrist (Matthew 24:16-18; Revelation 12:13-17).

David Gooding, in his commentary *According to Luke*, wrote:

The Lord's message was not salvation from the Romans but from personal sin, resulting in holiness and spiritual fruitfulness. He was the only one "having salvation." Long experience had shown that the walls of Jerusalem by themselves without the protection of God's presence were insufficient to keep her enemies at bay. If now she rejected her God-sent King and Savior, her walls would become the prison in which her ruthless enemies would confine and then slaughter her and her children.

Jesus was saying that all this was going to happen to them because they did not recognize the time of their visitation. By that he meant the season when God in his grace visited them in his Son. "There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name...." (John 1:9-12.)

That is often what happens with us. We do not know the time when God is suddenly in our midst. When he is in our midst he wants to bring blessings to our lives, but our flesh wants to resist him and his offer of salvation, resulting in spiritual death. As we presented the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Ukrainians, some of them did not realize they were receiving a visit from God. They were blinded by the ritual and by all the captivities they had been in. But the Spirit of God can change hearts, and I don't think the story is over yet!

What really happened on that first Palm Sunday? (1) Jesus the incarnate Son of God prepared to offer himself to Israel as their long-awaited Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6; Zechariah 9:9) and their King-Messiah (Psalm 118:26). He came to offer them not only himself but also the gift of salvation, to set up his kingdom of righteousness in their hearts. (2) Many responded to his offer, but (3) most of the nation rejected the Prince of Peace and his invitation of redemption, so (4) he wept over their future physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction. Because of their rejection Jesus had to finish out the week as the final Passover Lamb who willingly died for the sins of the world.

But because of his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his Ascension into the presence of his Father where he now reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords, we see the greatest redeeming value of the events of that first Palm Sunday: Regardless of the political, religious, or social circumstances of our lives, the Prince of

Peace is still inviting everyone to place their faith in him and be reconciled to God in order to enjoy the full peace of God!

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