

# The King We Didn't Expect

## A Bible Nerd's Guide to Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11 | Isaiah 50:4-9 | Philippians 2:5-11

### BIG IDEA

Palm Sunday is not just a cheerful parade scene. It is a **carefully staged, prophetically charged, politically subversive, and theologically rich revelation** of Jesus as King. Jesus is not merely entering Jerusalem. He is **revealing what kind of King He is.**

## 1) PALM SUNDAY IS A DELIBERATE MESSIANIC ACT

### Matthew 21:1-5

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' actions are intentional:

"This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet..."  
(*Matt. 21:4*)

#### Key Observation:

Jesus is not improvising. He is **deliberately embodying Scripture.**

#### Main point:

The triumphal entry is not just travel logistics. It is a **public royal sign-act.**

## 2) WHY THE DONKEY MATTERS

### Zechariah 9:9-10

Matthew quotes **Zechariah 9:9:**

“Behold, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey...”

This is often flattened into: “Jesus rode a donkey because He is humble.”

True, but incomplete.

## **In context, Zechariah 9 is about:**

- the arrival of **Zion’s king**
- the end of war
- the removal of military weapons
- a ruler who brings **peace to the nations**

### **Read the next verse too:**

“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem...  
he shall speak peace to the nations...”  
*(Zech. 9:10)*

## **So the donkey communicates at least 3 things:**

### **1. Messianic identity**

Jesus is claiming to be the promised King.

### **2. Peaceful kingship**

He is not arriving as a warlord or revolutionary general.

### **3. Prophetic intentionality**

This is a public fulfillment of Scripture.

## **Summary:**

The donkey is not just a humility symbol. It is a **theological billboard**.

# **3) DONKEYS COULD HAVE ROYAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Modern readers often hear “donkey” and think: “least royal animal available.” But in the Old Testament, donkeys/mules could also function in **royal and leadership contexts**, especially in peaceful settings.

## **Key OT Connection:**

### **1 Kings 1:33-38**

When Solomon is publicly installed as king, David commands:

“Have Solomon my son ride on my own mule...”  
(1 Kings 1:33)

That is not humiliation.

That is a **royal procession**.

## **Meaning:**

Jesus is not saying:

“I’m not really a king.”

He is saying:

“I am the rightful King, but I do not come in the way worldly rulers come.”

## **4) “HOSANNA” IS A CRY FOR SALVATION, NOT JUST PRAISE**

### **Matthew 21:9 | Psalm 118:25-26**

Many Christians hear “Hosanna” as if it just means:

“Yay Jesus!”

But biblically, it means something more like:

**“Save us, please!”**

or

## “Lord, rescue us!”

The crowd is drawing from **Psalm 118**, especially:

“Save us, we pray, O LORD!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!”

*(Ps. 118:25-26)*

## Important implication:

The crowd is not wrong to celebrate Jesus.

But their expectations of **how** salvation will come are likely too narrow.

### They likely want:

- political liberation
- national restoration
- visible victory
- a king who defeats enemies in familiar ways

### Jesus comes to bring salvation:

- through humility
- through obedience
- through suffering
- through the cross

## Summary:

Palm Sunday praise is **true**, but not yet **fully informed**.

## 5) MATTHEW 21 IS ALSO A “WHO IS THIS?” TEXT

### Matthew 21:10

“The whole city was stirred up, saying, ‘Who is this?’”

This is not just crowd chatter. It is a **major theological question**. Matthew’s Gospel has been answering this question all along.

## **Jesus has already been revealed as:**

- Son of David
- Son of Abraham
- Emmanuel
- Messiah
- Son of God
- Teacher
- Prophet

Palm Sunday gathers those threads together and asks:

## **Who is this, really?**

And Holy Week answers:

### **He is:**

- the promised King
- the suffering servant
- the obedient Son
- the crucified Lord
- the exalted Christ

## **6) ISAIAH 50 REMINDS US: THE KING IS ALSO THE SERVANT**

### **Isaiah 50:4-9**

Palm Sunday can feel triumphal.

Isaiah 50 reminds us that Jesus is not merely entering a city to receive applause.

He is moving toward suffering with His eyes open.

### **Isaiah 50 is one of the “Servant Songs” and emphasizes:**

- obedience
- faithfulness

- suffering
- confidence in God's vindication

### **Key verses:**

"I gave my back to those who strike..."  
(Isa. 50:6)

"I have set my face like a flint..."  
(Isa. 50:7)

### **Meaning:**

This is not passive resignation. This is **determined obedience**.

### **Palm Sunday + Isaiah 50 together show:**

Jesus is both:

- **the King who comes**  
and
- **the Servant who suffers**

That is one of the central paradoxes of Holy Week.

## **7) PHILIPPIANS 2 GIVES US THE THEOLOGY OF PALM SUNDAY**

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

If Matthew 21 gives us the **scene**, Philippians 2 gives us the **meaning**.

Paul describes Jesus as the One who:

- was "in the form of God"
- did not treat equality with God as something to exploit
- emptied Himself
- took the form of a servant
- humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross

### **The movement of the passage:**

## Downward

- preexistent glory
- self-emptying
- servanthood
- obedience
- death
- cross

## Then upward

- exaltation
- the name above every name
- universal confession
- universal lordship

## Main theological point:

Jesus' kingship is not built on **grasping**, but on **self-giving obedience**. Palm Sunday only makes full sense when read through that pattern.

# 8) A QUICK NERD NOTE ON PHILIPPIANS 2: "GRASPING" AND ADAM

Many scholars have noted that **Philippians 2** may intentionally echo Adam imagery.

## The contrast looks something like this:

### Adam

- made in God's image
- grasps at being "like God"
- reaches upward in disobedience

### Jesus

- truly in the form of God
- does **not** grasp
- moves downward in obedience

## Why that matters:

Jesus is not only the humble King. He is also the **faithful human**, the **last Adam**, the One who succeeds where humanity failed.

Palm Sunday is not just about kingship. It is also about **what true humanity looks like**.

## 9) PALM SUNDAY AS A COUNTER-IMPERIAL MOMENT

Palm Sunday likely has an **anti-imperial edge**. In the first-century Roman world, imperial entries and military processions were known public spectacles. Victorious rulers entered cities with:

- military imagery
- visible dominance
- public pomp
- displays of conquest

Now compare that with Jesus.

### He enters:

- not on a war horse
- not with military force
- not with imperial spectacle
- but on a donkey

That does not mean the scene is “less political.” It may actually be **more political**.

### In effect, Palm Sunday says:

**Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is.**

And Jesus’ version of kingship is radically different.

### Empire says:

- domination
- fear
- force

- coercion

**Jesus says:**

- peace
- humility
- obedience
- sacrificial love

## **10) PALM SUNDAY CONFRONTS OUR INSTINCTS ABOUT POWER**

Palm Sunday exposes how badly we still misunderstand power.

**We instinctively think power looks like:**

- force
- visibility
- control
- domination
- winning

**Jesus reveals a kingdom where power looks like:**

- humility
- obedience
- service
- suffering love
- cruciform faithfulness

That does **not** mean Jesus is weak. It means He is redefining greatness.

## **11) PALM SUNDAY IS THE FRONT DOOR TO HOLY WEEK**

Palm Sunday is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the final public movement toward the cross. The King who enters Jerusalem will soon:

- cleanse the temple
- confront false religion

- wash feet
- pray in anguish
- stand trial
- carry the cross
- and lay down His life

Palm Sunday should not just make us cheerful. It should make us **attentive**.

## WORD STUDY SIDEBAR

### 1. “Hosanna”

**Greek:** ὡσαννά (*hōsanna*)

Borrowed from Hebrew/Aramaic worship language.

**Hebrew background:**

Likely from הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא (*hoshi'ah na'*)

**Meaning:**

“Save, please!”

or

“Please rescue us!”

**Why it matters:**

“Hosanna” is not just praise language. It is **salvation language**.

### 2. “Humble / Lowly”

**Greek:** πραῦς (*praus*)

Used in Matthew’s rendering of Zechariah.

**Meaning:**

- gentle
- meek
- lowly
- humble

### **Important nuance:**

This does **not** mean weak or passive.

It often describes **strength under control**.

That fits Jesus perfectly.

## **3. “Form” in Philippians 2**

### **Greek: μορφή (*morphē*)**

Paul says Jesus was in the “**form of God**” and took the “**form of a servant.**”

### **Meaning:**

Not merely “appearance” in a shallow sense.

More like:

- true status
- real condition
- corresponding identity

### **Why it matters:**

Paul is not saying Jesus merely looked divine.

He is saying Jesus truly shared divine status, yet took the path of servanthood.

## **4. “Emptied Himself”**

### **Greek: ἐκένωσεν (*ekenōsen*)**

From the verb **kenoō** = “to empty”

### **Important note:**

This does **not** mean Jesus stopped being divine.

It means He poured Himself out in **self-giving humility and servanthood**.

### **Best understood as:**

Not subtraction of deity but **addition of servanthood**

# PALM SUNDAY OT ECHOES CHART

## Old Testament Echo → Palm Sunday Meaning

### **Zechariah 9:9-10**

**The king comes on a donkey, bringing peace**

→ Jesus is the promised peaceful King

### **Psalms 118:25-26**

**“Save us” / “Blessed is he who comes...”**

→ The crowd’s language is pilgrimage and salvation language

### **1 Kings 1:33-38**

**Solomon rides David’s mule in royal procession**

→ Donkey/mule imagery can carry royal significance

### **Isaiah 50:4-9**

**The obedient Servant suffers faithfully**

→ Jesus is not only King, but suffering Servant

### **Isaiah 62:11**

**“Say to the daughter of Zion...”**

→ Matthew’s citation blends prophetic royal imagery

### **Genesis 3 / Adam imagery**

**Humanity grasps upward in disobedience**

→ Jesus descends in obedience and humility

## CROSS-REFERENCE CLUSTER

### **Royal / Messianic Themes**

- **2 Samuel 7:12-16** — Davidic covenant
- **Psalms 2** — God’s anointed King
- **Psalms 72** — righteous royal rule

- **Isaiah 9:6-7** — messianic kingship
- **Zechariah 9:9-10** — king on a donkey

## Servant / Suffering Themes

- **Isaiah 42:1-9**
- **Isaiah 49:1-7**
- **Isaiah 50:4-9**
- **Isaiah 52:13-53:12**

## Humility / Cruciformity Themes

- **Mark 10:42-45**
- **John 13:1-17**
- **2 Corinthians 8:9**
- **Philippians 2:5-11**

## Exaltation / Lordship Themes

- **Daniel 7:13-14**
- **Acts 2:32-36**
- **Romans 1:3-4**
- **Revelation 5:1-14**

# SCHOLARLY THREADS WORTH NOTICING

## Scholars often note:

- **Matthew highlights fulfillment** to present Jesus as the climax of Israel's story
- **Zechariah 9** gives the background for peaceful, non-imperial kingship
- **Philippians 2** presents Jesus' identity in a deeply **cruciform** way
- Palm Sunday is often best read as both **royal** and **counter-imperial**
- Jesus is not anti-kingship, He is anti-**worldly** kingship

## Helpful scholars in this lane:

- **N.T. Wright**
- **Michael Gorman**
- **Richard Bauckham**

- G.K. Beale
- Scot McKnight
- Nijay Gupta

## QUICK HERMENEUTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Palm Sunday teaches us that:

- Jesus fulfills the **story of Israel**
- Jesus redefines **what kingship looks like**
- Jesus reveals the **true shape of power**
- Jesus moves toward the cross **knowingly and willingly**
- Jesus is both **King and Servant**
- Jesus' kingdom does not operate by the instincts of the world

## ONE-LINE SUMMARY

**Palm Sunday is the moment Jesus publicly reveals:**

**He really is the King, just not the kind of king the world expects.**