

8

The Servant of God

John 12:12—13:38

a Jesus Enters Jerusalem (12:12-19)

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the king of Israel!”
—John 12:13

All four Gospels describe Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Although the apostle John omitted many details that the other accounts included, he provided information unique to his presentation. Only John’s account mentions the crowd bringing palm branches, the disciples not comprehending the significance of the incident, and the Pharisees muttering their disapproval.

John wrote that Jesus approached Jerusalem five days before Passover (vs. 12; see 12:1). Along the way, a large number of people hurried to meet Jesus. These were probably

Jewish pilgrims on their way to the city of God to celebrate the Passover feast. Most likely they had heard about Jesus’ demonstrations of power. Indeed, they praised Him with palm branches and loud shouts, proclaiming Him to be the blessed One who saves. In fact, they quoted Psalm 118:25 and 26 in acclaiming Him to be the Messiah, who comes in the Lord’s name (John 12:13).



Palm tree in Israel. The crowds waved palm branches when Jesus entered into Jerusalem.

Jesus made His entrance into Jerusalem on a young donkey, which was in stark contrast to how royalty usually traveled. Instead of riding in a magnificent carriage or on a fierce steed, Jesus traveled as many commoners did. Despite the pomp befitting a king, Jesus portrayed humility even during this time of adoration.

In addition, riding on a donkey sometimes signified that the rider was on a peaceful mission. This is probably what John had in mind when he noted that Jesus was fulfilling Scripture, which had prophesied that the king of Israel would someday come to Jerusalem, seated on a donkey's colt (vss. 14, 15; see Zech. 9:9). Jesus was not bringing earthly peace, but peace between God and His people. In the same way, Jesus offers us a lasting peace that is not dependent upon circumstances.

John noted that he and the other disciples had not grasped the deeper meanings of such incidents as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Like the exuberant crowd, they thought that Jesus was the Messiah. But also like them, they did not comprehend the true nature of His mission. After Jesus was raised into His glory, however, they came to realize that such prophecies as Zechariah's were about their Master and to recognize what they themselves had done to their Lord (John 12:16).

Ask Yourself . . . *What do I understand about Christ now that was unclear to me a year ago?*

Those people who had followed Jesus from Bethany mixed with the

The Palm of Praise

From ancient times, people in the Middle East have valued the palm tree for its usefulness and beauty. Its branches and leaves are used as ornaments, while its sap is made into sugar, wax, oil, tannin, and dye. People in the Middle East eat its fruit and grind its seed for their camels. They use its branches in the production of mats, roofs, baskets, and fences. To desert travelers the shade of a palm tree is a welcome sight.

larger crowd that had come to worship Jesus. They told the others that they had witnessed an incredible miracle. They had seen Jesus call Lazarus from his tomb and Lazarus actually return to life. News of this miracle quickly spread so that people from Jerusalem and the surrounding area came to see the extraordinary healer who had performed this sign (vss. 17, 18).

Meanwhile, the Pharisees responded to this fanfare with panic and pessimism. They had attempted to ruin Jesus' popularity among the people, but had utterly failed. Instead, it appeared to them that the whole world had become enamored with the teacher from Nazareth,

The ancient Jews applied religious symbolism to the palm tree. For example, the psalmist described the righteous as flourishing like the palm tree (Ps. 92:12). They also celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with palm branches. Early Christians adopted this appreciation of the palm tree. John himself noted that people in heaven will pay homage to Christ with palm branches (Rev. 7:9), which became a symbol of Christ's victory over death. In fact, the emblem of the palm leaf frequently accompanied the monogram of Christ on Christian tombs.

who was becoming more and more of a thorn in their side (vs. 19).

b Jesus Predicts His Death (12:20-36)

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. . . . I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

—John 12:23, 32

At this point in John's narrative, he briefly mentioned "some Greeks," who were on a pilgrimage to Jeru-

salem to worship at the Passover feast (vs. 20). The term "Greeks" does not necessarily mean that they were from Greece, nor does it mean that they were Greek-speaking Jews. Instead, they were probably Gentiles who had converted to Judaism.

Since Jesus generated so much excitement, it is not surprising that both Jews and Gentiles eagerly wanted to see Him. Some of these Greeks approached Philip, hoping to gain an audience with Jesus through a member of Jesus' inner circle. John did not say why they asked Philip, though he noted once more that Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee. Perhaps they selected Philip because he had a Greek name and might respond more kindly to their request. In any case, he told Andrew, and together they delivered this message to Jesus (vss. 21, 22).

Jesus' reply must have bewildered the two disciples. He not only seemed to ignore their petition, but He also voiced a series of puzzling statements. Actually the interest of the Greeks is significant in that it indicated that the scope of Jesus' ministry went beyond the Jews, encompassing the whole world. Now that He was drawing the attention of both Jews and Gentiles, the time would soon be right for Him, as the Son of Man, to lay down His life and then be glorified. It would later become clear to His disciples that their Master did not die just for the Jews, but for Jewish *and* Gentile believers. Thus Jesus did answer their question—anyone who seeks the Christ can come to Him (vs. 23).

Jesus gave the analogy of a grain of wheat to indicate the purpose of His ministry. A wheat kernel is a single seed, but if it is buried in the ground and dies, it will spring up into a plant and produce a multitude of seeds (vs. 24). Likewise, after the Son of Man would die and be buried, God would raise Him from death to life so that many could be redeemed and live through Him. Obviously Jesus was speaking of Himself.

Jesus extended the analogy of a wheat kernel by applying it to people in general. Using the expression of love and hate, Jesus did not intend for His words to be taken literally. By loving our life, Jesus was speaking of serving ourselves above all others and making our own life more important than anything else. When we do this, we will fail to preserve our life and instead will lose it. By hating our life, Jesus was speaking of serving others before ourselves and submitting our life to the Lord. When we do this, God will bless us with a life in which we will enjoy eternal fellowship with Him (vs. 25). We must die to ourselves if we expect to bear much fruit for God.

The key to the abundant life is being a servant to Jesus, and to be His servant we must follow wherever He leads us. In fact, Jesus serves as a model for us to follow. As He served God, even to the point of sacrificing His life, we are to serve Him, sacrificing our lives to Him. Furthermore, because of God's love for His Son, He will honor all who faithfully

serve Jesus and will include them in His Son's glory (vs. 26).

Ask Yourself . . . *How has God led me to this point in my life? In what direction is He taking me now?*

Despite the adoration being lavished upon Him, Jesus revealed His inner torment to His close friends. He knew the cross awaited Him. Unlike everyone else who presumed that Jesus would be glorified in a worldly sense, Jesus knew the tide would turn. He was about to suffer intensely, and only His Father could deliver Him from the coming ordeal. Despite His trepidation, Jesus also knew that it was for this purpose that He came into the world—to die so that others could live. So He remained firm in His determination to serve God in this way. Indeed, He would do it in order to glorify His Father (vss. 27, 28a).

After Jesus concluded His discourse with prayer, God acknowledged and affirmed His Son in a voice so that all who were present could hear. God's voice, however, perplexed the people. Some mistook His voice for thunder, while others thought that an angel had spoken. In response to their confusion, Jesus noted that God's audible endorsement of Him and His ministry was for their encouragement (vss. 28b-30). The challenge to their faith was certain to increase in the coming days.

Though we might not audibly hear God's voice today, He still remains a source of encouragement to those who believe.

A Voice from Heaven

In response to Jesus' prayer, God answered Him audibly from heaven (John 12:28). This is the third recorded occasion in which a heavenly voice is publicly heard concerning Jesus, and the first instance in John's Gospel. The other two events were during Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) and transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35).

The first was at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the second at a crucial turning point in His ministry, and the last toward the end of His ministry.

The hour had come not only for Jesus to be glorified but also for Satan and the world to be judged. When Jesus was raised up in glory, God's enemies would be driven out in disgrace (vs. 31).

Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection would draw people from all over the world to Him. Jesus described His death in this way to indicate not only how He was about to die, but more importantly, what it would mean (vss. 32, 33).

The crowd listened to Jesus, but they did not understand what He meant. Instead, they contended that His words were in conflict with the law. Nowhere in the five books of Moses, however, does it say clearly that the Messiah will remain forever. They were imposing their expectations upon the Scriptures. They were so confused about Jesus' teaching concerning the Son of Man that they inquired as to the Son of Man's identity (vs. 34).

Jesus did not directly answer the question posed to Him. Rather than proclaiming Himself to be the Son of Man and trying to explain His divine mission in that role, Jesus stressed the urgency in which His hearers needed to decide and act upon His revelation as the Christ. Using the symbols of light and darkness, Jesus warned them that He, as the light, would be with them in His earthly presence only a short time longer. Now was the time to put their trust in Him before the darkness came. Those who didn't would remain lost in the darkness, but those who entrusted themselves to

Him would become children of light (vss. 35, 36a).

After Jesus spoke to the crowd, He went away and secluded Himself with His disciples (vs. 36b). The public ministry of Jesus was coming to a close, and He needed to prepare for the rejection and suffering He was about to experience.

C The People Refuse to Believe (12:37-50)

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.

—John 12:37

Most of the Jews who came to see Jesus refused to put their faith in Him despite having witnessed the many miracles He had performed. In fact, the prophet Isaiah had foretold that the Jews would reject the suffering Servant of God (vss. 37, 38; see Isa. 53:1).

John pointed further to the ministry of Isaiah to explain the people's unbelief. The Lord had commissioned Isaiah to take His message to the people of Judah while warning him that His words would blind their eyes and deaden their hearts (John 12:39, 40; see Isa. 6:10). They would become so obstinate that they could neither see nor understand God's message and so hardened that they could not repent and be healed of their sins. They were like a child who

has misbehaved, and once scolded, becomes even more rebellious.

Some people are no different today. No matter how harshly the Lord disciplines them, they seem to dig their heels in even deeper.

Ask Yourself . . . *What was the harshest rejection of Christ I have ever witnessed?*

In a similar manner, the Jews who heard Jesus and witnessed His great deeds refused to repent. When Isaiah witnessed the glory of Christ seven centuries earlier, he fell down in worship (vs. 41).

John would not want us to think that the entire Jewish population outside of Jesus' closest followers did not believe in Him. In fact, many of the religious leaders believed. Sadly, however, they would not publicly acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, because they were afraid of the Pharisees, who had the desire and the influence to expel believers in Jesus from the synagogue (vss. 42, 43; see 9:22). They preferred to remain comfortable in their social standing while accepting people's approval rather than God's.

Jesus concluded His public ministry with one last appeal to the people to put their trust in Him. Believing in Him would be the same as believing in God, who had sent Him. Indeed, God the Father and His Son are so close that to see one is to see the other (12:44, 45).

Not only is Jesus one with God, but also He is the light that dispels the darkness. Everyone is condemned to spiritual darkness except

for those who receive Jesus as the spiritual light. Jesus beckoned the people to enter into His light and be delivered from the world's darkness (vs. 46).

Jesus' purpose for coming into this world was not to judge those who refused to listen and obey His teachings. In fact, they condemn themselves by rejecting Jesus and His words. Jesus' purpose for coming was to save the world—that is, to save those who receive Him as their Lord and Savior (vss. 47, 48).

Jesus did nothing apart from His heavenly Father, who had sent Him into the world to deliver the message of eternal life. Jesus conveyed the divine message exactly as God

desired. Since Jesus delivered the message using the exact words and methods His Father instructed, Jesus is rightly described as the Word of God (vss. 49, 50).

John 13 in Brief

During the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated what it truly means to be a servant. Even though He was the Son of God, He humbled Himself by washing the feet of His disciples. The act was so humble that at first Peter refused to allow the Lord to wash his feet. Jesus told Peter and the others that unless this be done, He could not accept them as one of His own. After washing their feet,

Pharisees Who Believed

Scripture identifies two Pharisees who were members of the Sanhedrin and who seem to have believed in Jesus. Although Nicodemus served on the Jewish ruling council, he went to Jesus seeking the truth (3:1-21), defended Jesus against the hostility of the other Pharisees (7:50-52), and helped bury Jesus after His crucifixion (19:39-42).

Another prominent member of the council was Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:43). He was not only a disciple of Jesus, but he also sought permission from Pilate to bury Jesus in his own tomb (Matt. 27:57-60; Mark 15:43-46; Luke 23:50-55; John 19:38-42). Though John said Joseph feared the Jews, Luke stated that he had not consented to the Sanhedrin's decision and action to arrest and try Jesus for blasphemy.

Jesus explained that He had set an example for them—this was symbolic of how they were to serve one another.

Jesus clearly indicated that one of them would betray Him. In fact, that person was one of them who was sharing the bread they were eating. At the time, none of them knew that the betrayer was Judas Iscariot. After Satan entered Judas, Jesus told him to proceed quickly with his treachery. The others assumed that he was going about normal business

for the group.

Jesus told His friends that He was about to be glorified, and that God would be glorified in Him. After instructing them to love one another in the same way He loved them, He told them He was going away. Peter exclaimed that he would follow Jesus anywhere—he would even die for Him. Jesus sadly predicted, however, that Peter would disown Him. In fact, he would do so three times before the rooster crowed the next morning.