

# The Real Jesus | Unexpected King (Mark 11:1-11)

April 10, 2022 | Matthew McNutt

**[Title Slide]** We have been working our way through the book of Mark, but this week we're doing a bit of a time jump. If you haven't read your way through Mark yet, this is going to be a bit of a spoiler, but the last five chapters, or the last third of the book, focus on the events of one week in Jerusalem that culminates in Jesus' death and resurrection. Yup, I literally just blew the ending of Mark before Nate could even get there next week. You're welcome.

That final week was a doozy, though. It makes sense that it's so much of Mark. And it kicks off in Mark 11 with what your Bible has most likely titled, "Jesus' Triumphant Entry." Palm Sunday. Jesus didn't just enter Jerusalem, it was a circus. Jerusalem normally had a population of around 40,000-80,000 people, but during Passover Week, which this was, that population would climb to as many as 250,000 as Jews made the pilgrimage there.<sup>1 2</sup> Matthew describes the scene like this:

*Matthew 21:10a (NLT) The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as he entered.*

Picture the Eagles' Super Bowl victory parade. Crowds ecstatic, cheering, screaming. Crying hosanna, waving palm leaves. To our ears, it sounds like the loudest worship service ever. Which was upsetting to the religious leaders who wanted Jesus out of the picture. Luke writes that when the religious leaders told Jesus to tell the crowds to calm down, his response was this:

*Luke 19:40 (NLT) He [Jesus] replied, "If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!"*

And yet, a few days later these same crowds would be screaming for Jesus' death. Look, I've been to enough Philadelphia sports' events to know fans can be fickle. I've never seen people turn from cheering for a player to booing them so fast, but even so this transformation in reaction seems extreme.

It's easy for us with the benefit of hindsight to see Jesus as a Messiah in the Palm Sunday narrative, to see Him as the Son of God arriving to bring salvation. But here's the thing, it was not so obvious to the crowds that day. In fact, they were completely misreading what was happening.<sup>3</sup> John, writing about it later in his gospel, pointed out how even the disciples didn't get it:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2047474-2,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://go.efca.org/blog/palm-sunday-triumphal-entry>

<sup>3</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), Kindle location 6322.

*John 12:16 (NLT) His disciples didn't understand at the time that this was a fulfillment of prophecy. But after Jesus entered into his glory, they remembered what had happened and realized that these things had been written about him.*

Even the disciples after the fact looked back at Palm Sunday and went, “oh, that’s what that was about. We totally missed it!” So, what did they think was happening?

Let’s dive in and find out. For context, John’s gospel records that the events immediately preceding Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem was the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from death back to life. Kind of a big deal. And those witnesses would have been making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, so word would have spread. But even before that, the three years of public ministry building up to this point had been filled with incredible miracles, all signs that pointed to Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah. But what kind of Messiah? I believe the evidence points to these crowds believing Jesus was a political savior.

Why? Over centuries of being a conquered people, they had gradually shifted their theology to align with their desire to be free from Roman dominance. Rather than seeing the promised Messiah restoring them to God and establishing the heavenly kingdom, they believed the promised Messiah would restore their national identity and establish an earthly kingdom. And here’s the thing, a Messiah that could raise people from the dead recalled the days of Joshua leading the people to victory in the promised land – scripture notes that even though they were smaller, their soldiers would not die and had victory. Jesus’ power over death made the impossible idea of a Jewish revolution overthrowing the massive Roman army suddenly seem possible.

Mark Comer writes in his book, *Live No Lies*, **“It comes as no surprise that Jesus’s most ardent followers just assumed he would take up the sword, rally an army, and kick off a war with Rome. He was the king, and that’s what kings did: they used violence to seize political power and take what they wanted.”**<sup>4</sup>

Yet, here’s the thing; Jesus’ actions throughout these events point to a far more unexpected kingship.

*Mark 11:1-11 (NLT) <sup>1</sup> As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the towns of Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives.*

Mark is remembering this event with the clarity John noted; he sees prophecy being fulfilled that he didn’t catch in the moment. Which is why he wants us to know this begins on the Mount of Olives. Zechariah 14 contains prophecy about a time when

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<sup>4</sup> John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies That Sabotage Your Peace* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2021) 246.

Israel would be conquered and God would return to take His place as their king. Note what it says partway through that prophecy:

*Zechariah 14:4a (NLT) On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem.*

Mark continues;

*Jesus sent two of them on ahead. <sup>2</sup> “Go into that village over there,” he told them. “As soon as you enter it, you will see a young donkey tied there that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>3</sup> If anyone asks, ‘What are you doing?’ just say, ‘The Lord needs it and will return it soon.’”*

At first glance, it looks like they already know Jesus is Lord, is God, right? However, the word in Greek that is translated ‘lord’ here is **kyrios**, which is not a reference to deity. It’s more like a British “lord” or “sir,” and is actually translated as “owner” when the same word is used in Mark 12:9, which is why many scholars believe that the donkey’s owner may have been traveling with Jesus and that Jesus had told him He needed it.<sup>5</sup> In other words, when this man’s neighbors see a couple men show up and start untying the donkey, their response that the owner needs it and will be back with it soon would reassure any concerns about what they were doing.

*<sup>4</sup> The two disciples left and found the colt standing in the street, tied outside the front door. <sup>5</sup> As they were untying it, some bystanders demanded, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” <sup>6</sup> They said what Jesus had told them to say, and they were permitted to take it. <sup>7</sup> Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments over it, and he sat on it.*

There are a few things going on here, so let’s take a moment to unpack it all. The first is this idea that Jesus would assume His right to use this donkey for His purposes. There was a “custom of impressment” which allowed prominent figures such as rabbis and kings to requisition for temporary service someone else’s animal or animals.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of it having never been ridden before also had meaning; kings would never ride an animal that had been ridden by anyone else.<sup>7</sup> There was a belief that an animal dedicated to a sacred purpose must have not been put to ordinary use beforehand.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Jesus choosing to ride a donkey into Jerusalem was an incredibly provocative decision. The practice was that anyone visiting Jerusalem must walk on foot<sup>9</sup>;

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<sup>5</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2018), 365.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Huat Tan, *Mark (New Covenant Commentary Series)* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Lutterworth Press, 2016), 150.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 366.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, Kindle location 6357.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 6326.

regardless of whether they were poor, nobles, or royalty. They would do so because of the sacredness of the city. Josephus records that even Alexander the Great dismounted from his horse to enter the city.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the Old Testament only contains two mentions of animals being ridden into Jerusalem. The first is at the coronation of king Solomon in 1 Kings 1:33. The second is in a prophecy recorded in Zechariah 9:9, 550 years before Palm Sunday<sup>11</sup>:

*Zechariah 9:9 (NLT) Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt.*

This was a day when prophecy was fulfilled. And if their expectation is for a political revolutionary, they would see Him, a descendent of David, riding in like Solomon - the king under which Israel was its most powerful. But here's the thing; a conquering king would have ridden a powerful animal, a noble horse. Not a humble donkey's colt.<sup>12</sup> They saw what they wanted to see, but Jesus' actions told a different story.

*<sup>8</sup> Many in the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others spread leafy branches they had cut in the fields.*

This was something people would do to welcome a conquering king; it speaks to the crowds' expectation that Jesus was about to take power.<sup>13</sup> For the crowds, this was a victory parade. The long-awaited revolution was about to happen. They had dreamed of this moment.

*<sup>9</sup> Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*<sup>10</sup> Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Praise God in highest heaven!"*

"Hosanna!" Over the centuries, this word has transformed into a beautiful term of worship for God – and rightfully so. But words evolve. Their meanings change over time. For example, did you know that the word "nice" originally meant ignorant?<sup>14</sup> It was what you called someone you thought was stupid or foolish centuries ago, yet over the centuries has transformed into a compliment. Having said that, if any of you tells me this sermon is "nice" afterwards, I will be offended.

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<sup>10</sup> Tan, *Mark*, 150.

<sup>11</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 4047.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Carter, *Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2019), Kindle location 8528.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 367.

<sup>14</sup> <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/articles/10-english-words-that-have-completely-changed-meaning/>

Back to “hosanna.” It literally meant, “save we pray save now,” and was something people would cry out to kings.<sup>15</sup> In other places in the Old Testament it’s translated, “help us,” as people cried out to their king (2 Samuel 14:4, 2 Kings 6:26). In other words, the garments, the palm branches, the language – this was not the actions of people who viewed Jesus as the Messiah we now know Him to have been. They thought He was a son of David, like Solomon, their future king after he raised up an army and led the revolution against Rome. And what better time to do it than when hundreds of thousands of Israelites were gathered in one spot? The anticipation for what He would do next must have been electric.

***<sup>11</sup> So Jesus came to Jerusalem and went into the Temple. After looking around carefully at everything, he left because it was late in the afternoon. Then he returned to Bethany with the twelve disciples.***

What? He went to the temple ... and then left? Somewhat anticlimactic. And then in the following days His actions were even more confusing – certainly not the actions of a revolutionary. He threw the tables and cleansed the temple, He confronted and called out the religious leaders, not only did He not lead a revolution – He told them to pay their taxes to Caesar! And the crowds turned on Him, He was a disappointment, He was not any kind of Messiah they wanted. Even their demands to release Barabbas instead of Jesus makes sense when we realize this context; Mark 15:7 reveals that Barabbas was a revolutionary who tried to use violence against Rome and failed. It’s as though the crowds, when they screamed “crucify Him” and “give us Barabbas,” were saying “at least Barabbas tried! He may have failed, but at least he took action.”

Can you imagine? These were men and women who had the scriptures memorized. It was a critical part of their education and culture. They knew the prophecies. They had debated them for centuries. And they were so convinced up their interpretation of God’s Word, clouded by their desires, so convinced they knew what God’s plan was, that they couldn’t even recognize God right in front of them.

They couldn’t recognize God moving right in front of them.

What an indictment. But we can’t point the finger, can we? History is full of stories of people using scripture through the lens of their desires that we look back on and wonder how they could have been so wrong.

- The crusades; violence, rape, pillaging, all done in the name of Christ.
- Slavery in America defended by Christians and Pastors.
- Scripture used to defend women not being allowed to vote or even open bank accounts.

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), Kindle location 4666.

- The incarceration of American citizens because of their Japanese descent – scholars write that a significant factor in the mistrust and motivation was Christians fearing Buddhist faith and labeling these citizens of our country a threat to our Christian nation.<sup>16</sup>
- Dr. Martin Luther King was roundly criticized by white Pastors using scripture to tell him to be silent.

Does anyone else get increasingly uncomfortable as the list gets closer to recent memory?

It's so easy to allow our pride, our desires, our will, shape how we use and view God's word, isn't it? Proverbs gives a stark warning about this, though:

*Proverbs 11:2 (NLT) Pride leads to disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.*

The crowds in Mark's gospel – disgrace is a good word to describe their actions. Their lack of humility, their inability to acknowledge their own bias, their own rationalizations, their own misuse of scripture to serve their desires led to disgrace. I find it terrifying that some of Jesus' harshest words were directed to those who were considered deeply religious. It is such an easy trap to fall into! We must have faith characterized by humility, a willingness to accept God's leading even when it differs from our desires or preferred course.

Paul describes this further in his letter to the Colossians;

*Colossians 3:12 (NLT) Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*

How do we avoid this trap? By being humble, by being merciful, kind, gentle, and patient.

Would your coworkers describe you as humble, merciful, kind, gentle, patient? Would they use any of those words?

Would your family? Your neighbors? Your classmates? Your teammates? The people who read your comments on social media?

Would they use any of these words?

Can you imagine facing God one day and being asked the question, "how did you miss Me? I was right there in front of you."

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/complex-role-faith-incarcerated-japanese-americans-during-world-war-ii-180971509/>

If we have all the time for political debates, to opine on the cost of gas, to argue and call others out on social media, but no time for the Bible, no time for prayer, no time to be held accountable by other believers, how are we any different from this ancient crowd? Is that not arrogance suggesting that we somehow know God enough? We've already read the Bible enough?

Here is my challenge for you this week; take a step back from these distractions. Use this Easter season to look in the mirror. Commit to regular time in prayer and scripture – even if just a few minutes a day at first; the more you fill yourself with God's teaching, and ask God for the wisdom and humility to see His will, the more your actions will reflect Him. And if you are not in a circle of believers who can help hold you accountable, help point you to humility, mercy, kindness, gentleness, and patience, then put it on your connection card and let us get you plugged into a group, a circle of believers. Let this season of celebration of life from death be a time where we each put aside death and embrace the life God is giving us. Palm Sunday is a day when we celebrate our Unexpected King, but it is also a warning and a call to humility.

Let's pray.