

# Hosanna!

Mark 11:1-11 (ESV)

March 9, 2003

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” What great praise and prayer are raised here! What great promise is fulfilled! What great truth is spoken not only for them but also for us and for all people!

For you see, “Hosanna” is more than a funny sounding word. To our ears, it means Palm Sunday, nothing more and nothing less, precisely because of this story. We never hear it anywhere else. The Palm Sunday hymns we sing today treat “Hosanna” almost as if it were a chorus, perhaps nothing more than a fa-la-la-la-la in a Christmas carol. But what this transliteration hides from us, by carrying over the sounds but not the meaning of the word, is what the people were really saying, singing, shouting, and praying that wonderful and dreadful day. For “Hosanna” comes from Psalm 118, verse 25, where its meaning is properly translated, “Save us!” This is what the people were crying out. Out of 150 Psalms, this is the one they were singing. This is what they were saying, and they were saying it to Jesus. In fact, Psalm 118 reads, “Save us, we pray, O LORD!” As a hymn and a prayer, the Psalm is properly and appropriately addressed to God. Yet in the Gospel According to Mark, in our reading for today, the crowd is shouting this Psalm to Jesus, in loud, wonderful, energetic, and defiant prayer, pleading to him, “Save us! Save us! Save us!”

You see, unlike in our hymns today, on the lips of that crowd, “Hosanna” was not a funny sounding word or a filler for the chorus. It certainly was not idle conversation or background noise. To pray, “Hosanna,” to Jesus was as good as saying, “Jesus is Lord.” Marching into the city, with the temple rising high in sight ahead of them, and angry priests watching the crowd they were losing, the people took a holy hymn inspired and intended for the worship of God Almighty and sang it to this man, Jesus, riding down the street not on a great, prancing war horse but on a colt, and a borrowed colt at that, with his feet dragging the ground! To sing, “Hosanna,” to him meant that God Almighty had come down from heaven and lived here among us in Jesus. There would be no more waiting. Salvation had come. The day had arrived.

Marching into the city, with nervous Roman soldiers lining the road, whose hands were at the ready on their swords and who were suspicious of any noisy commotion, the crowd shouted all the louder, “Hosanna,” which meant, “Jesus is

Lord.” This was more than a key to the city. It was more than the key to their hearts. This great parade was the celebration of the victorious entrance of the new king into the capital of his new kingdom. For them to say, “Hosanna,” “Jesus is Lord,” meant clearly, by implication, “Caesar is *not* Lord.” What rare courage was this!

So might this brave word mean for us today, if we take it up as our own: “Caesar is not Lord! War is not Lord! Hunger is not Lord! Sex is not Lord! Power is not Lord! Money is not Lord! Terror is not Lord! Weapons of mass destruction are not Lord! Drugs are not Lord! Poverty is not Lord! Fear is not Lord! Disease is not Lord! Death is not Lord! No, no, no! Instead, Jesus is Lord! Jesus of Nazareth is Lord! Jesus, the Son of God, is Lord!” Can we still say that today? “Hosanna! Save us, Jesus! Jesus is Lord!” Salvation has come. Today is the day. Thanks be to God.

Some might think we are beyond all this. Who is interested in salvation today? Few if any seem burdened by sin. After all, we have a benevolent government and a public education system to tell us what to think. We have a fantastic entertainment industry to tell us what good morals are and how to behave. We have a robust economy to feed and house us. We have a homeland security department to keep us safe from terror. We have psychologists to counsel us. So why is it that there is an underlying sense of unease about life, of brokenness, of alienation? Why is it that we cannot be good by trying hard? Why is it that we cannot overcome our own self-centeredness by focusing attention on ourselves? Why is it that nation rises against nation, people against people, race against race, class against class, parents against children? Why is it that we are so needy that we cannot even admit our own neediness but instead profess ever more loudly our self-sufficiency?

Could it be that we find ourselves in a quicksand like situation, so that the more we struggle the farther we sink? Could it be that we should acknowledge that we are in a mess from which we cannot extricate ourselves? Could it be that we should admit our need for help, our need for salvation? Even that we could not do on our own. Even that crying out would be the result of grace. “Save us, Lord Jesus!” Do we not need this as much as any generation of humanity? All of this we have from the first word the crowd spoke. What else did they say?

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” The one who came, indeed the one who came as Lord, did so precisely because he did not presume to be Lord but instead pointed beyond himself to his God and Father who sent him. Jesus was Lord and is Lord because he came not on his own but in the name of the Lord. He could not save us from self-centeredness by being self-centered! He saves us by being God-centered, as we were made to be, as we were meant to be, and as we now have been redeemed to be again. So it is that the new kingdom was begun,

unlike any other. Jesus entered the city. Jesus entered the temple. Jesus claimed his victory. But he knew the price he would pay. He had already, three times, predicted to his disciples that he would die. There was nothing in this parade for him! He had nothing to gain by entering Jerusalem! But he did it anyway. Jesus poured out his life for those who hated him, for those who misunderstood him, for those who deserted him, for you and me. Thus was sin defeated.

So how can we respond faithfully today to the salvation won in and by Jesus Christ? Our first and most important response is the praise and worship of God, as made known in Jesus Christ, after the example of the crowds in today's reading. Such worship is centered on the God and Father of Jesus Christ, so that we do not glorify ourselves. It is based on the word of God, so that we do not make it up ourselves. It includes praise of, and prayer to, God, which sets us free from the false worship of country, government, economy, money, family, or self. The first and most appropriate response we can make to Jesus Christ, who comes in the name of the Lord, is to worship God and sing of his praises. Those who join us by way of radio join their hearts with ours in this great and wonderful endeavor.

A second response we can make to Jesus Christ is our faith, our belief in and commitment to God in Christ. Putting this second instead of first may surprise you. Does not worship flow out of faith? Well, yes it does. And yet, faith also flows out of worship. Here are we exposed to, and therefore grasped by, the word of the living God. You do not have to believe perfectly to start worshiping. But if you keep on worshiping, you will be led into ever deeper and deeper faith. Again, the significance of this might be made clear by considering the alternatives. If we do not believe in God, we are left to faithlessness, wandering, and lostness. The commitment to any other center of value, loyalty to anything less than God Almighty, will always fail us and let us down. And we especially need to realize that our adult faith or faithlessness influences children. It is our responsibility to expose them to Jesus Christ, to the word of God, to the worship of God and also to the Christian faith. One simple, straight forward way for us to exercise our adult responsibility and to teach the children is for us all to be here in worship every Sunday and to have them with us. We can teach them by example that the worship of God Almighty is more important than sports or entertainment. And if we do not teach them this, who will?

A third response we can make to Jesus Christ is our gratitude. The fundamental dynamic of the Christian faith is that the grace of God in Jesus Christ elicits gratitude from us. We express this gratitude by our prayers of thanksgiving, morning, noon and night. We express this gratitude by our lives of thanksgiving. We express this gratitude by our offerings, just as the disciples and the crowd took the clothes off their backs for Jesus! Are our gifts of money significant enough to show

a sufficiently high level of gratitude for Jesus' saving humility, death, and forgiveness of our sin? Are our gifts to God worthy of his gift to us? If we say worship God in Christ, and if we say we believe in God in Christ, do we also put our money where our mouths are?

A fourth response we can make to Jesus Christ is our obedience. Note the example of the disciples in today's reading: they did what they were told. What are we told to do? Love God and love one another. We love God through our worship, faith, and gratitude. We love our neighbors through sharing the gospel and helping those in need. Our servant king calls for servant followers. Are we doing this?

A fifth response we can make to Jesus Christ is one of humility. Only as we are keenly and painfully aware of our own failures, shortcomings, and sinfulness can we be forgiving, loving and compassionate toward one another. We are not perfect. We are nowhere close. We do not pretend to be. We are broken human beings, grateful for the healing we receive from our Lord, Jesus Christ. This gives us a clue on how to treat each other. Our humble king calls for humble followers.

Yes, Jesus is a king, a victorious king, yet unlike any other king or ruler we have known. His strange entrance into Jerusalem, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, portrays Jesus as a humble King, who dies that we may live, and who lives again that we may live forever. Having heard today's reading from the gospel, we either reject it or accept it. There is no middle ground. If we accept it, we worship God, believe in God, give thanks to God, and obey God in all humility. If we reject it, we stand against everything Christ stood for and everything he died for. Which will it be?

Could it be by the grace of God that even yet today we could add our voices to those the crowd? "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Minister  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220  
[www.grace-covenant.org](http://www.grace-covenant.org)