

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-Six: The Triumphal Entry
Commentary

John 12:12-19

12:12–13. This was indeed an “hour of decision” for the crowd. In this event, recorded also in Matthew 21, Mark 11, and Luke 19, Jesus allowed himself to be recognized as the King of Israel. The word hosanna means “save now,” likely a plea for action against the authority of Rome. The first confrontation was a confrontation of choice. The blessing of verse 13 comes from Psalm 118:25, 26 and John’s later citation in verse 15 from Zechariah 9:9.

Josephus estimated the Passover crowd at 2,700,000, suggesting they would have been driving over a quarter of a million lambs into Jerusalem for this Passover feast. The palm branch had become a national symbol during the time of the Maccabees, and the nationalism and liberation of this occasion would certainly fit the scene.

Carson sums it up: “The crowds do not simply pronounce a blessing in the name of the Lord on the one who comes, but pronounce a blessing on the one who comes in the name of the Lord. The next line shows that this is the way the crowd understands their own words: blessed is the king of Israel is not a quotation from Psalm 118, but messianic identification of ‘he who comes in the name of the Lord’ ” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 432).

12:14–15. The synoptic Gospels make a great deal more of the donkey than does John, and herein we see his purpose and focus once again. As to the quote from Zechariah 9:9, we should not be thrown off balance by the fact that it is not an exact citation. The phrase Daughter of Zion is a personification of Jerusalem, and in a broader sense the nation of Israel. The general spirit of the coming of the gentle king certainly captures the essence of the Zechariah passage. Lewis remarks, “The Zechariah prophecy, though known to be messianic, linked Messiahship to peaceful and non-political ideals, and Jesus only chose to make such a public ‘statement’ when His rejection by the Jewish rulers was irreversible and His death very near” (Lewis, Peter. *The Glory of Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1997, p. 169).

The key to much of this type of New Testament text is the phrase that appears at the end of verse 14—as it is written. Everything about Jesus’ life and ministry fulfilled Old Testament promises. This triumphal-entry event forced people to make a decision, fulfilled what the Bible promised, and offered the Passover Lamb—the only lamb in the city that day riding on a ceremonial donkey.

12:16. The disciples still had not grasped Christ’s nature and work, even as long as they had been with him. Writing many years after these events, John admitted that only after the glorification of Jesus (probably a reference to both resurrection and ascension) did they really grasp what had happened to them. Indeed, we find them trying to recreate this kind of event in Acts 1 when they asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

(Acts 1:6). Like the disciples, our faith may have slow formation, but it should lead us to rock-solid commitment.

The inscription on the fly leaf of a Bible found in a tin box under the cornerstone of Wellesley College reads, “This building is humbly dedicated to our heavenly Father with the hope and prayer that He will always be first in everything in the institution—that His Word may be faithfully taught here, and that He will use it as a means of leading precious souls to the Lord Jesus Christ.” Whether that mission still guides the leaders of Wellesley is another matter. What we do know is that it should serve as the lodestar for every evangelical church, college, and mission board.

12:17–19. The confrontation and misunderstanding led to hostility. Actually, we find nothing new here. The common people, still affected by the Lazarus event, came out to see Jesus. The religious leaders rejected him with increasing malice. Their exaggeration makes us wish they had spoken the truth, but public miracles do not always produce personal faith.

John once again applied a touch of irony in reciting the last phrase of our passage: Look how the whole world has gone after him! Again like Caiaphas, we see a prophecy unintended by the prophet. Surely John wanted his readers to grasp his use of the word *kosmos* to include many beyond the numerous pilgrims crowding Jerusalem for the Passover feast. For him the word describes lost and blind people on a planet in rebellion against its Maker. And if we wonder how far John was willing to push his point, do not go away—Gentiles were right outside the door.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).