



# Strands of Thought

FROM GREG STRAND

ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE (/BLOG/THEOLOGY)

## Palm Sunday: Reflections During "Shelter in Place"

*Celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry amid the COVID-19 outbreak*

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Early this morning, the beautiful sunrise graced the beginning of this day. My heart was drawn to God to give him thanks and praise: “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24). Remembering and

professing these truths were important as a foundation and frame for me and for this day.

I then read an update on the statistics of COVID-19 on the **Johns Hopkins University of Medicine** (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>) site.

- *Global*: 1,216,422 total confirmed cases, with 65,711 deaths, along with 252,478 total recovered (meaning some are now naturally immunized, not vaccine immunized, since none exists).
- *U.S.*: 312,245 total confirmed cases, with 8,053 deaths, along with 15,021 total recovered.

And today is the day we remember and celebrate Palm Sunday, the day the church, the people of God recall and revel in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Matt 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19).

Which of these is true? All of them. This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. The COVID-19 curve has not flattened, meaning the virus continues to result in the sickness and death of many, and projections indicate it will get worse before it gets better. And this is the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is the first two truths we affirm that make sense of the middle one, our present life-situation.

I recall Palm Sunday in my childhood years with fondness. It was a childlike faith, of course, but it was a special day, a day we celebrated and recreated that historical moment when the crowds threw their cloaks on Jesus' path and they waved palm branches. I, along with a number of other children, waved palm branches. That is a memory for which I give thanks. We did similar things with our children. Our grandchildren will have a different memory, at least for this year.

More importantly than recreating the historical moment is the truth behind the event. It was a historical event laden with revelatory truth. Most likely, on this day, many heard a sermon on one of the historical accounts recorded in the Gospels. If not, I encourage you to read one of them listed above. Instead, I will focus on a few key revelatory truths from the historical account:

1. As Jesus enters into Jerusalem in this final week leading to the cross, this pilgrimage, notes one, “takes Jesus to the political, economic, and religious heart of first-century Judaism.” *What is COVID-19 revealing about the heart of the church? The world?*
2. It can appear that what is happening is a result of the wheel of history and historical circumstances spin around, that it is out of one’s control. And to the contrary, Jesus is in complete control. He is on the way to the cross, and this is the path to get there. Even though the crowd does not know it, Jesus does. He asks his disciples to fetch a donkey for him, and he explains to them what will happen before it happens. When asked, they are to say “the Lord has need of it.” In referring to himself as “Lord,” Jesus claims to have sovereign authority over all these events. *What hope and assurance does this give to us in this moment, on this day, at the beginning of this week?*
3. This marks the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. A Messiah was promised, and the time is now fulfilled when the Messiah has come. God made a promise, and he kept his promise. God is a promise-keeper, and that promise was his Son. *Knowing this, what, or who, is the culmination of God’s plan? What is the only hope of humanity? Living with this truth in light of the end, what does this mean for us today?*
4. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem as a (the) king. This is affirmed in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (Zech 9:9), in the titles used, e.g., “King,” “Son of David,” “prophet Jesus,” “Lord,” “King of Israel,” and in the actions undertaken in response to Jesus, viz., throwing their cloaks on the road (2 Kgs 9:12-13) and the waving of palm branches. The cloaks on the

road reveal submission to Jesus as king, royal homage, and the waving of branches symbolizes Jewish nationalism and victory over enemies. *What are ways we acknowledge, affirm and submit to Jesus' kingship? How do we reflect that we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom while here on earth?*

5. Jesus enters into Jerusalem as a/the k/King and many recognize it and respond appropriately. However, Jesus' kingship and kingdom are different than what they expected. It was not a political kingdom that would be marked by might and strength which would bring national deliverance from the Romans, their political enemies. Rather, Jesus was a shepherd-king, a suffering-servant who was humble, and this was reflected in the donkey he rode. It was a kingdom other than the kingdom(s) of this world. It was the kingdom of God over against the kingdom of man. In a few short days when Jesus is brought before Pilate, we will hear him say in response to whether or not he is the king of the Jews, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). *What or who is the king of my heart? How does that manifest in a kingdom? What are marks of the kingdom of the world today? Who or what is the king of those kingdoms? What does COVID-19 reveal about the kingdom of this world? What is revealed by responses of Christians, those whose kingdom is not from this world?*
6. In affirming Jesus as the promised Messiah and the King, the crowd quoted the Old Testament Scriptures (Ps 118:25-26), shouting "Hosanna" (Matt 21:9(2x); Mark 11:9; 11:10; John 12:13). It is a cry, "Lord, save us," or "save, now/please." This prayer is especially meaningful during the Passover season as the people of God remember and celebrate the great rescue and liberation from Egyptian slavery, and they ask God to do it again, this time from Roman rule. They misunderstand the kind of King Jesus is and the kind of kingdom he ushers in, and they misunderstand the salvation, the

freedom he comes to bring, and the means by which he will bring it (the cross). *On this day, we remember being rescued from sin, from being spiritually dead to experiencing life. And we ask him to rescue us again. Not in the sense of needing to be saved spiritually again, but to be saved from the ravages of sin and living with the effects of sin in a fallen world manifesting at the moment in COVID-19. What are some of the things from which you need to be saved?*

7. On this day when Jesus entered into Jerusalem for his final earthly Passover meal, the people rejoiced and celebrated over him. They responded to him as a king, as royalty. Although most responded this way, the Jewish leaders were offended and asked Jesus to rebuke his followers. Jesus said to the leaders that if the followers did not respond that way, then the stones would cry out in acclamation of who Jesus is and in judgment against the Jewish leaders (Luke 19:40). We will also come to see how fickle the crowd is. As this week progresses, those who ascribed to Jesus kingly authority, and responded in ways that recognized his kingly crown, they change their attitude and shout for a crown of thorns to be placed on his head. In a few short days they move from wanting to crown him King to place a crown of thorns on him as one accursed. *What is a right response to Jesus? Is it a settled response? As we pray hosanna, Lord, save us, we also ask that our lives would be marked by seeking first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33), of living based on the truth of the now of the kingdom while we also live faithfully and fruitfully in the not-yet of the kingdom.*

There is much for us to ponder as we reflect on this final week of Jesus, the days between his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his death on the cross, his burial, and his resurrection one week after his triumphal entry. It is impossible for us as Christians living when we do in redemptive history to consider one aspect of Jesus' life in this final week apart from the whole. We cannot think of the crucifixion apart from the resurrection. But as we remember the whole, it is

also important to remember the parts, because focusing on the various aspects of Jesus' ministry brings a greater understanding of and gratitude for the whole work of Christ on our behalf.

I conclude with another reminder of the waving of palm branches, the time at which the ultimate and final victory will be realized. At this time there will be no more "not yet" to the kingdom. This "great multitude," which is comprised of those "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," stand before the throne and the Lamb and cry out, which we also make our prayer, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (Rev 7:10, 12).

And as they worship God and the Lamb, they will experience unending, eternal blessedness: "and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:15b-17).

On this Palm Sunday in the midst of "shelter in place" due to COVID-19, we have a sure and confident hope in God.



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## EFCA

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