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**Matthew 27:46, English Standard Version.**

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

**Palm Sunday:** *Proclaiming his righteousness to a people yet unborn!*

We all know the up, down, then up story of Holy Week, with Jesus making his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, then being gruesomely crucified, then gloriously rising from the dead. But this is the wrong way to see it. Here is a quote that we all know, from the Gospel of Matthew, and I have edited this:

**21** *Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. <sup>8</sup>The crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut palm branches and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”*

The word “*hosanna*” is Hebrew, and it translates literally to “*Save now*” or “*Save us now.*” The crowd is looking for Jesus to save them, to rescue them. They don’t mean save us from sin or from an eternity separated from God. They mean save us now - on Earth. Save us from the Romans who are the latest colonial empire to invade our land and conquer us. Right up to the moment of his death, Jews thought

that Jesus would bring them an earthly kingdom, which was, of course, very wrong. Jesus brought a Heavenly kingdom, a spiritual kingdom. Jesus, of course, is not there to save them from a temporal, temporary enemy. He is there to save them from an otherworldly, eternal enemy. Jesus, as he is riding into Jerusalem, with the crowds celebrating his arrival, is mentally shaking his head, thinking, you still don't get it, do you? I'm here to establish the Kingdom of God, not some Kingdom of People. But it is a high point. Jesus is finishing his mission on Earth, and the crowd is celebrating the savior they are still in the process of understanding.

Before we continue with this, I remember very occasionally seeing donkeys as a boy growing up in what was then a partly rural area of Ventura County in California. When we saw donkeys, it was always near or on one of the farms. The area was quickly changing, becoming urban, covered with cement and steel. But there was a magical period of my childhood when I lived near berry and lettuce farms, and I rode my bike along long, tall eucalyptus windbreaks. We thought donkeys were hilarious. They were short, squat, waddled as they walked, and moved so slowly that we wondered why the farmers who used them didn't just buy bicycles. Once, a buddy of mine and I were riding our bikes alongside a field, rolling under the shade of the eucalyptus trees, smelling their sweet scent, when we came across an entire family, two parents and two kids, on donkeys. The parents each

had their own and the two kids were riding on a third donkey. I must admit that we laughed. We were too far away for them to hear us, but it seemed hysterical to us. It was the late 1960's – and here were these people riding on a narrow access road next to their field on these ridiculous animals.

But why did Jesus lumber into Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews, on a donkey? Was he just being humble? The image is almost funny to us. Why not a horse? They certainly had horses and it would have been far more regal and far more fitting for a peaceful savior who is about to create a spiritual kingdom to ride a horse, right? In truth, this is false on both accounts. Even the vast majority of wealthy Jews had no access to horses. And a horse was not the traditional mount for an Israelite king or ruler to ride on. During the days of the Judges, the leaders of Israel before the kings, and later, during the days of the kings of Israel, the royal ride was a donkey. Consider 2 Samuel, 16:1–2, ESV, and this quote is abridged:

**16** *When David had passed beyond the summit, Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth met him with a couple of donkeys saddled. <sup>2</sup>The king said to Ziba, “Why have you brought these?” Ziba said, “The donkeys are for the king’s household to ride on.*

King David has fled Jerusalem because his son Absalom is trying to steal the throne from him. David comes across Ziba a steward of Mephibosheth, a grandson of Saul, the previous king. (Remember, David is not related to Saul.) Ziba has fresh donkeys ready for King David and his entourage. King David doesn't ride a horse. He and

his people, because of their high, regal rank, ride donkeys. If you were a peaceful Israelite ruler, you rode a donkey. A horse meant you were leading an invasion. The Romans rode horses to symbolize their military hold on Israel. In fact, donkeys are apparently intelligent, very social, sure-footed, and very protective of livestock. They have been serving humans for at least 7,000 years.

After the ride into Jerusalem, next, a few days later, Jesus dies on the cross:

*<sup>45</sup> Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. <sup>46</sup> And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Then, third, another few days later, we have the resurrection of Jesus:

***28** After the Sabbath, toward dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> Behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> For fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid. I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."*

But let's go back to the down part of that up, down, up sequence: the crucifixion of Jesus. We have the stunning entry into Jerusalem, and we have the uplifting resurrection. In between is this seemingly sad moment when Jesus dies. But is this true? Is this a sad moment, breaking that high we get when Jesus, knowing he will die and be resurrected, rides that regal ride into the city that hosts the Second Temple, the one that was built after the return from Babylonian exile?

Consider this. A lot of people over the centuries have wondered why it is that Jesus exclaims *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* just before his death on the cross. Scholars believe that most of his contemporaries believed that Jesus was sent by God to build a new Jewish empire on Earth. The people who laid down palms for him as he rode a donkey into Jerusalem yelled: *“Hosana!”* which means *“Save us now”*. That word *“now”* is critical. Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem didn’t understand that Jesus was about to die in a seemingly humiliating fashion, a death meant for thieves and murderers. They didn’t know that Jesus wasn’t going to build a new Jerusalem on Earth. If Jesus knew that he was indeed the Messiah and not an earthly king, if he knew that he was God himself, why on Earth would he proclaim *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Surely, he knew that he was not forsaken by God. Surely, he knew that as soon as he died, even though he would suffer horribly first, he would be just fine. Perhaps Jesus succumbed to his human side, that he had an emotional collapse, that part of his coming to Earth as a man meant that in his last moments, he was human and frail.

But there is another explanation as to why Jesus uttered these specific words, which turn out to be quite deliberately quoted by Jesus from the first line of Psalm 22. First, we should note that in the Gospel of Matthew alone, Jesus quotes what we call the Old Testament around 45 times. The point is that Jesus

was a Jew. Hebrew Scripture was well known to him, and his followers in the Jerusalem around knew it well, too. That's why he quotes Deuteronomy, Exodus, Genesis, the Psalms, and other Old Testament books. He does this to reinforce a point by referencing literature well known to those around him.

Before we look at Psalm 22, here's something to keep in mind. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in English – and in fact, it does not rhyme in Hebrew. And while English poetry is engineered around sounds, Hebrew poetry is structured around thoughts or ideas, not sounds. Now, let's look at Psalm 22, the first line of which Jesus utters while dying on the cross. Psalm 22 is in a series of Psalms, 21 to 31, that offer comfort when dealing with terrible situations. They assure us of God's steadfast love and empathy. They help us obtain serenity during troubled times. Many people consider Psalm 22 to be a prophesy of the crucifixion. The first four stanzas are a call for help. This covers the first 11 verses. Then the Psalmist grows desperate. The Psalmist is cornered, encircled by evil. Death will come, surely. But then, the Psalm becomes glorious in its tone. The Psalmist turns his thoughts to other people and not just himself. He prays that others will be rescued, that it won't be just him who is relieved of his affliction. The Psalmist prays that all people will become people of God and will be delivered from all that makes them suffer. Here is a highly abridged form of the Psalm:

<sup>1</sup> *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?*

<sup>2</sup> *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,  
and by night, but I find no rest.*

<sup>3</sup> *Yet you are holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

<sup>4</sup> *In you our fathers trusted;*

<sup>5</sup> *To you they cried and were rescued;*

<sup>6</sup> *But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.*

<sup>13</sup> *they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion.  
you lay me in the dust of death.*

<sup>16</sup> *For dogs encompass me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me;  
they have pierced my hands and feet—*

<sup>18</sup> *they divide my garments among them,  
and for my clothing they cast lots.*

<sup>19</sup> *But you, O LORD, do not be far off!  
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!*

<sup>21</sup> *Save me from the mouth of the lion!  
You have rescued me!*

<sup>23</sup> *You who fear the LORD, praise him!*

<sup>24</sup> *For he has heard, when I cried to him.*

<sup>27</sup> *All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you.*

<sup>28</sup> *For kingship belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.*

<sup>30</sup> *Posterity shall serve him;  
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;*

<sup>31</sup> *they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,  
that he has done it.*

Many who have studied this believe that by quoting just the first line of this Psalm, Jesus is invoking the *entire* Psalm – which his followers in Jerusalem would certainly know, as they are mostly Jews. This psalm was particularly well known during Old Testament times. As this psalm declares, Jesus knows that in times of great suffering, God will do what God always does – he will come to our aid. God will always listen. God will give us peace no matter how we are suffering. We are so confident of this, in fact, that we pray that all people come to embrace God. In fact, this psalm, which starts out with a statement of lament on the part of someone who is suffering, ends by proclaiming that God will be proclaimed by many generations yet unborn. It is the ultimate statement of hope in the future.

Getting back to the donkey story in Oxnard. We were a bit to the side of the field, on a dirt road that ran along the windbreak. Then Mom and Dad and Dick and Jane came lumbering by. We imagined that we had gone back in the Time Tunnel, with these medieval peasants plodding along, unable to afford horses or perhaps dirt bikes. Then, we came to a particularly shady area, where my friend and I and the family were in shadow. The ground there was wet. Our bike tires sunk in a bit. Then, worse, where the soil had washed away, the ground got rocky. Our bike tires had trouble with the terrain. They were built for smooth, hard ground. We slowed way down. But the donkeys passed by us. We

ended up walking our bikes. It was a lesson about donkeys – and how God created them for a reason. I'll get back to this.

Let's keep in mind that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on an animal reserved for the honor of Israelite kings. He did so to celebrate the introduction of the Kingdom of God, despite most of his followers not knowing this. They would learn soon. Then Jesus dies, but we remain on a high note. Jesus tells us this:

*<sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you.*

*<sup>28</sup> For kingship belongs to the LORD,  
and he rules over the nations.*

*<sup>31</sup> they shall come and proclaim his righteousness.*

Here is an edited version of the crucifixion from the Gospel of Mark:

*<sup>34</sup> And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"  
<sup>37</sup> And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup> And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"*

Unlike the followers of Jesus who witnessed the crucifixion, and unlike most of the countless people who would read this story in the two millennia following the death of Jesus, this centurion knew nothing about this new faith. This man was certainly a hardened Roman officer. He had probably been in charge of Jesus'

execution process, from start to finish. He had brutally killed many men in the past. But he almost certainly did not know that *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* is the beginning of a Hebrew psalm. He didn’t know that this psalm begins as a lament and then ends with an affirmation of God’s protection, God’s deliverance from all that is evil, and a firm statement that many generations yet unborn will proclaim the righteousness of God. Still, there was something that this Roman officer saw in Jesus, the way he approached death, that made him realize who he had just executed in a fashion specifically designed to be cruel and prolonged. Even at the supposed low point of the story from Palm Sunday to the Crucifixion to the Resurrection, we see the worst of the worst discover the Holy Spirit within him and see the truth.

This is Palm Sunday. There is nothing depressing that’s going to happen in the coming week. Jesus is riding his donkey into Jerusalem, announcing the culmination of his mission on Earth, and knowing that it’s all going to work out. Ours is a faith of kindness and optimism. We must always remember that moments of suffering are opportunities to grow more confident in our trust in God. Times that seem bad are not low points in our lives of faith.

It was not humiliating for Jesus to ride a donkey into Jerusalem. It wasn’t a setback that he was crucified. The week of Palm Sunday to Easter is the most

important and uplifting week in the Christian calendar, and yes, it beats Christmas. It isn't the beginning of a story. It is the successful conclusion of a magnificent story, and it is a promise of glorious times to come. And luckily, my friend and I didn't have too far to walk our bikes before we were able to ride again – and catch up with those donkeys.