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Luke 19:37-38, **ESV**.

³⁷As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Jericho to Jerusalem.

Let’s take a trip with Jesus. We read the details of that fateful trip from Jericho to Jerusalem in Matthew Chapter 21, Mark Chapter 11, and Luke Chapter 19. Here is how it concludes with this famous quote from Luke: *³⁷As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”* We know that soon, just days later, Jesus would be killed. Let’s step back to the beginning of this journey.

Jericho is down in the Jordan River Valley. Jesus visited this city frequently. It was – and still is – about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem, near the Jordan River, and about ten miles northwest of the Dead Sea. It is known as one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. When the Israelites conquered Canaan, it was

the first city of which they took control. Today, the population is about 20,000, with the ruins of the ancient city lying among modern homes. And today, it is in the West Bank Palestinian territory. The Bible calls it the City of Palm Trees, and it was a wealthy town during the time of Jesus; the city was a green oasis in the center of a barren desert. Apparently, homeless people, disabled people, and outcasts lined the road in and out of town because wealthy traders and political leaders would come and go frequently. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus cures a blind man on the road to Jericho.

We often mark the beginning of Jesus' triumphant journey into Jerusalem as having started in Jericho. This is where the Gospels tells us that an ever-growing crowd of people began following Jesus and his Apostles on their way to Jerusalem. He started out in the morning, and Jesus made an ascent into the central mountains, then reached the Mount of Olives which overlooks Jerusalem from the east. Jesus was very far from alone. There was a reason why so many people were able to join him on the road: he was making a journey with thousands of pilgrims who were celebrating the annual festival of Passover. We learn in Matthew and Mark that this triumphant entry into Jerusalem marks the moment when Jesus publicly reveals himself as the true, long-awaited Jewish Messiah. Before this, he had often urged people to keep his identity a secret. But

he now reveals himself not as a conquering king, which many Jews were looking for, a man who would push the Roman Empire aside, but as a kind, humble, and suffering servant. While in one sense, he is just another holiday pilgrim, he is in truth about to tell the world that he is the new spiritual king of God's people.

In Matthew, Jesus departs Jericho along with his disciples and a group of others. We owe this historic journey in large part to the Roman Empire – not because they were about to crucify Jesus, but because they built the roads upon which he traveled. Indeed, the road between Jericho and Jerusalem can be traced very accurately because of the preservation of the physical remains of the Roman roads in the area, which follow the topography of the region. Interestingly, though, there were existing, more primitive roads along the same path prior to the Romans coming along.

According to the historian Josephus, during Passover, the population of Jerusalem would grow to many times its size, possibly reaching three million people for Passover – an amazing number back then. Jericho was an important stopover for pilgrims headed for Jerusalem. Despite the numbers of people traveling, it was a dangerous trip: there were bandits along the road, provisions were far from guaranteed, and children needed to be looked after by more than just their parents. For this reason, pilgrims traveled in groups, often with people

they met along the way. Almost the entire trip from Jericho to Jerusalem lies along a sheltered side of the central mountains. With moisture blocked by long ridges, most of the trip would be in a very arid environment. There were virtually no trees. It was desert. The road runs from the northeast to the southwest. They would pass the palaces of Herod the Great in Jericho and end up at the northeast corner of Jerusalem's great wall. The distance is approximately fourteen and a half miles. It's uphill most of the way, climbing some 3,400 feet. How many of us today would take on such a rigorous, hazard-filled trip today to celebrate our faith? And remember that they would do this for multiple festivals each year. The trip could be completed by conditioned people in one very long day.

The Romans facilitated all this with amazing road technology, not just given the era, but from even a modern engineering perspective. If maintenance of our roads were abandoned for 2,000 years, how much of them would remain? There were two stages in building a Roman road. First the roadbed was prepared by building up many thin layers of cement, crushed brick, and clay. In some places, this was replaced by shaving the hard bedrock. Then, second, the road was paved with flat stones. They were built, of course, for military reasons, so that masses of forces, huge siege machines, and supplies could be moved along them quickly. Horses were not ridden for agricultural or civilian travel purposes: they were used

almost strictly for military purposes. Along a given series of mountainous roads like the ones from Jericho to Jerusalem, the Romans would have to build periodic retaining walls to support mountainside roads, dig deeply into bedrock to minimize steep gradients, and establish cisterns and guard posts. Archeologists have heavily studied this section of Roman roadway, made famous by Jesus. Four intact mile-stations, along with fragments of another dozen mile-stations have been found. The same, broader system, which across the entirety of the Roman Empire was truly massive, would later support the evangelical efforts of the Apostles and Paul. We can thank the military efforts of the Romans for the spread of our faith from North Africa to what is now Great Britain.

This was far from the first time that Jesus traversed these roads, from Jericho to Jerusalem. Luke reports that his parents made annual pilgrimages for Passover. Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha and must have used these roads to do so. He was traveling these roads when he learned that Lazarus was sick. Along the way lies the traditional tomb of Lazarus. As they were nearing their destination, they had to leave the main road. This was because the Roman road reached Jerusalem from the northeast, but the main gates to the Temple were approached from the south. They probably turned off the Roman road just before reaching the Mount of Olives, which overlooks Jerusalem. But no

remnants of this smaller road exist today, although the topography would make it a natural choice for a fork in the road. Taking this route might have placed them in greater danger from bandits, so we cannot be certain that this is where they turned off toward the Temple.

From the Gospel of John, we learn that Jesus reached Bethany and then sent his Apostles to a nearby village, Bethphage, to get a young donkey for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem. The last piece of the trip was about five miles. The donkey was a sign of meekness, not of military might, but still Jesus was greeted by throngs of people laying down palm leaves as a symbol of kingly honor. They declared him to be the long-awaited Messianic savior, and they were mistakenly in the belief that he was about to order God to destroy their Roman overlords. What they didn't know was that Jesus' kingdom would be a spiritual one, not a physical one, like the Roman Empire. He would use their roads, but he would not build his own roads. Here is what we read in John: ¹² *The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.* ¹³ *So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"* ¹⁴ *And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,* ¹⁵ *"Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"*

The palm trees that are referenced many times in the Bible are date palms. This tall, straight tree was a symbol of grace and dignity. The large leaves were used for making roofs, fences, containers, and rope. The dates that hang down in immense clusters were the chief food of many ancient peoples. Some modern peoples today rely heavily on them. It is believed that wine and a sweet something like honey was made from them. Laying down palm leaves wasn't just some crazy gesture that someone came up with on the spur of the moment. Palm leaves were a symbol of survival, of God's grace, of victory. Palm leaves were used heavily in another Jewish festival, the Feast of the Tabernacles, or Sukkot, when Jews celebrated God's protection in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land. When they laid the palm leaves down for Jesus' donkey to walk upon, they were declaring a great triumph over their pagan enemies, the people who had enslaved and impoverished them. The Roman authorities certainly took note of the threat. So did the religious authorities of the day.

Palm Sunday is an intriguing holiday for us. Naively, we are simply celebrating Jesus' final donkey ride into Jerusalem, where he is accepted as a savior, one who is about to die in a horrible way. Consider this. The Maccabees were a group of Jewish rebel warriors who took control of Jerusalem by force from the Seleucid empire in 163 B.C. The people celebrated with palm branches.

We read about this in the apocryphal books 1st and 2nd Maccabees. The Maccabees became the kingly family of Jerusalem. They did, in a literal sense, drive out an enemy. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on his pathetic donkey they shouted “Hosanna”, which means “Save us”. But they meant it politically and militarily, not spiritually. They wanted a Kingdom of God on Earth, not in Heaven. They didn’t have the fully formed notion of an eternal life like we do: they wanted their savior to save them in the here and now. They waved palm branches and laid them down on the ground, in imitation of the Maccabee period, expecting a conquering king at the head of a heavenly army, prepared to take on the Romans and other aggressive neighboring nations. Palm Sunday is an ironic Christian holiday. We need to remember that the shouts of “Hosanna” soon turned to shouts of “crucify him”. Only a few days separate the two events: the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and Jesus’ death sentence. The Bible does not explicitly tell us why the common people seem to have changed in such a dramatic fashion in such a short time. Perhaps there were two different groups of people, and not that many turned from welcoming to condemning Jesus. More likely, they suddenly realized that Jesus wasn’t going to be the next Maccabee king.

For us, though, Palm Sunday isn’t some ironic letdown. We’re not moping around, wondering where our earthly savior is. We know that Jesus came to

establish an eternal kingdom. What's interesting is that there are lots of suggestions in the Old Testament, indicating that perhaps when the Messiah comes, his kingdom will not be an earthly, temporal kingdom. Consider Psalm 145:13 – *¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.* Or Daniel 7:14 - *his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.* We're blessed. We are a New Testament people. We have the luxury of living in the wake of Jesus. If Jesus had thrown aside the Roman Empire, it wouldn't have done us much good. The Roman Empire, like all earthly empires, died anyway. We are here today to celebrate Jesus' walk from Jericho to Jerusalem that ushered in a kingdom that includes the Earth and all that lies beyond. We live in that kingdom today and we will live in it for all of eternity. When we confront sickness, loneliness, unemployment, medical bills, or loss, we know that it is temporary. There is only one eternal empire: the kingdom ushered in by Jesus as he rode on a humble donkey into Jerusalem. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for your far-reaching mindset. While humans were focused on short term earthly goals, you had the long game in mind. You were looking after our eternal futures. We celebrate that walk and that donkey ride from Jericho to Jerusalem. We celebrate a God who truly loves us. Amen.