

TRIUMPHAL ENTRY OF THE KING

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Matthew 21:1-11](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Matthew 20:25-28; 21:1-11](#)

MATTHEW 21:1-11

¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”



KEY TEXT

“Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”—**Matthew 21:5**

GOD FREES AND REDEEMS

Unit 2: Liberating Gospels

LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the details of the triumphal entry.
2. Explain Matthew’s use of **Zechariah 9:9**.
3. Express worship to the Lord by writing a poem, prayer, or devotional thought.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. Columbo

B. Lesson Context

I. The Preparation (Matthew 21:1–5)

A. Setting (vv. 1a)

B. Instructions (vv. 1b–3)

Planning the Journey

C. Fulfillment (vv. 4–5)

II. The Procession (Matthew 21:6–11)

A. Obedience (vv. 6–7)

B. Reaction (vv. 8–9)

C. Identity (vv. 10–11)

Cheering for ... Him?

Conclusion

A. Faith on Parade

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Bethany	<i>Beth-uh-nee.</i>
Bethphage	<i>Beth-fuh-gee.</i>
Galilee	<i>Gal-uh-lee.</i>
Hosanna	<i>Ho-za-nuh.</i>
Jerusalem	<i>Juh-roo-suh-lem.</i>
Maccabees	<i>Mack-uh-bees.</i>
Messiah	<i>Meh-sigh-uh.</i>
Nazareth	<i>Naz-uh-reth.</i>
Zechariah	<i>Zek-uh-rye-uh.</i>
Zion	<i>Zi-un.</i>

Introduction

A. Columbo

In most mysteries the reader or viewer tries to figure out “who done it” along with the detective in the story. The best stories always have a surprising ending. But the 1970s show *Columbo* turned this formula on its head. The viewer saw the murder and knew the perpetrator from the very beginning, so the tension came from the uncertainty of whether the case could be solved. Inspector Columbo, the detective played by Peter Falk, appears to be bumbling and dull-witted. However, he is actually quite a good sleuth. Each episode followed how the inspector cracked the case. At the end, Columbo revealed proof of the perpetrator’s identity.

The proof of Jesus’ identity is clear to us because we have all the evidence of history at our disposal. To his disciples and the crowds, however, the mystery was intact: Who was Jesus? What was he going to do in Jerusalem? The triumphal entry was one twist in the plot on his way to the cross.

B. Lesson Context

[Matthew 21–28](#) is devoted to the final week of Jesus’ life through the resurrection and

post-resurrection appearances. That week left the world changed forever.

Today's text comes from Monday of that fateful week and covers the triumphal entry. This event is recounted in all four Gospels (see [Mark 11:1–11](#); [Luke 19:28–44](#); [John 12:12–19](#)). Matthew, Mark, and Luke frequently overlap in their presentations, so we do not find ourselves surprised by the shared information. But to have an event shared also in John is less expected. Inclusion in all four Gospels speaks to the importance of the triumphal entry.

Several months before, Jesus had warned his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, including his own death, at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes ([Matthew 16:21–28](#)). Peter strongly resisted such an idea. He even rebuked Jesus. The idea of Jesus' dying was completely foreign to what Peter and the other disciples understood Jesus' mission to be. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the disciples must have believed that their hopes of establishing Jesus as an earthly Messiah were about to be realized.

Though the disciples did not yet understand, Jesus' death would fulfill the Scriptures—just not as they had expected. The theme of fulfillment of Scripture permeates Matthew's Gospel. From Jesus' birth, Matthew both alluded to prophecy ([Matthew 1:1](#); compare [Isaiah 9:7](#); [Jeremiah 23:5](#); etc.) and outright quoted it ([Matthew 1:22–23](#)). Matthew spells out in his account of the triumphal entry that this event fulfilled prophecy once again and paved the way for other fulfillments to come.

I. The Preparation

([MATTHEW 21:1–5](#))

A. Setting (v. 1a)

1a. As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives,

Jesus and his disciples were traveling with many other pilgrims to *Jerusalem* to celebrate Passover (see [lesson 6](#)). The people who lived in Jerusalem also were preparing for the festival and the influx of religious visitors. Jesus arrived “six days” before the Passover, spending time in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany (see [John 12:1–3](#)). The two small villages of Bethany and Bethphage are on the eastern side of Jerusalem. Bethany served as Jesus' normal base of operation when in Judea. The village was located about two miles southeast of Jerusalem.

The arrival was late Friday afternoon, for Jesus and his fellow Jews would not travel all the way from Jericho on a Sabbath Day, which begins at sundown Friday night. The group arrived at *Bethphage* (meaning “house of unripe figs”), which is near Bethany (see [Mark 11:1](#)). *The Mount of Olives* is a north-south ridge that flanks the eastern side of Jerusalem. Bethany and Bethphage were on the far side of this mount, somewhat isolated from the city, yet conve-

niently close to it.

B. Instructions (vv. 1b–3)

1b–2. Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.

The *two disciples* Jesus sent are not named. The expectation that the female *donkey* (a jenny) was *tied* with *her colt* indicated that the donkey was not out grazing or involved in work, but ready and waiting for Jesus’ purposes. She may have been fitted with some type of halter that allowed her to be tied to a post, readily available for being led back to Jesus. All four of the Gospels mention the younger donkey (compare [Mark 11:2](#); [Luke 19:30](#); [John 12:14](#)), but only Matthew includes the detail that there was an older female donkey as well.

Jesus’ knowledge of the availability of the colt may have come supernaturally. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the Lord made prior arrangements for the use of the animal.

3. “If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

Jesus anticipated the disciples’ being asked about taking the donkeys, and told his followers how to answer. *The Lord needs them* functioned as a password or code. This gives us the impression that Jesus had prearranged the availability of the two animals. Many commentators believe that the owner of the colt was quietly making a contribution to Jesus’ ministry in his own way. There may have been thousands of such followers in Palestine at that time. The Lord needed some to serve publicly out in front, but he also used many whose ministries were performed quietly behind the scenes.

PLANNING THE JOURNEY

After months of quarantine, my wife and I were delighted to attend a family wedding 2,000 miles from home. And planning was part of the fun! Do we drive or fly? We decided to drive. Do we use our camping trailer or stay in motels? We decided on “hoteling.” That settled the “Which car?” question, since my wife’s car pulls the trailer and my car gets better gas mileage.

Reservations were made, routes were decided, and the car was given a thorough safety check. With all that done, all that was left was to pack: travel clothes, wedding clothes, and masks.

Perhaps Jesus had been envisioning this short journey from Bethphage to Jerusalem for a

while. When the day of the triumphal entry arrived, his plans were complete and in keeping with the Father’s will. How do you seek or recognize God’s guidance for your own life’s journey?

—C. R. B.

C. Fulfillment (vv. 4–5)

4. This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

Jesus alluded to *the prophet* Zechariah, who prophesied concerning the “king” coming into Jerusalem ([Zechariah 9:9](#)). His prophecies and others were not fulfilled by random chance. The events they foresaw were pieces of God’s deliberate plan, a plan carried out by Jesus.

A key verse in understanding this is [Matthew 5:17](#), which sets the tone for the entire book in the area of prophecy: Jesus did not come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets ... but to fulfill them.” There is perfect convergence between the prophets—who were given a glimpse of God’s plan—and the Messiah, who enacted the plan centuries later (examples: [Matthew 1:22–23](#); [2:5–6](#); [8:14–17](#)).

What Do You Think?

Does your knowledge of the Old Testament bolster your faith? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

How would the apostles answer this question? Give scriptural examples.

5. “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

So there would be no mistake or ambiguity, Matthew recorded an abbreviated version of Zechariah’s prophecy. We noted earlier that *Zion* is equivalent to Jerusalem. (The *Daughter* part comes from [Isaiah 62:11](#).) Though some claim that Jesus never saw himself as the prophesied Messiah, or Christ, Scripture shows otherwise (examples: [Matthew 16:17](#); [Luke 24:25–27](#); [John 4:25–26](#)).

Jerusalem was overflowing with Passover pilgrims at this time. This feast temporarily would nearly double Jerusalem’s normal population of perhaps 50,000.

Here was their king, entering the royal city. Even though Jesus rode on an animal and was the object of such praise, his humility was actually on display. He was not riding a giant stallion with flaring nostrils, but a lowly donkey. The animal was used primarily for plowing or as a beast of burden, not to announce the presence of royalty. We easily imagine Jesus’ legs sticking out from the donkey’s round belly, with Jesus’ feet barely clearing the ground. He is the humble king—a contradiction of terms in the ancient world, but perfect in God’s plan.

What Do You Think?

How do you practice humility?

Digging Deeper

When boldness is called for, what continued role does humility play in your actions?

II. The Procession

([MATTHEW 21:6–11](#))

A. Obedience (vv. 6–7)

6–7. The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on.

A triumphal procession in the city of Rome could take weeks to prepare. The Roman general or emperor receiving “the triumph” rode in a ceremonial chariot specially crafted for the event. The Roman triumphs consisted of long parades of dignitaries, captured enemy soldiers and kings, and wagons heavy with the spoils of war. Such carefully planned spectacles sometimes included the erection of a new triumphal arch. In contrast, Jesus’ entry was much more impromptu.

Saddles as we know them were not commonly used in the ancient Near East. Instead, *the disciples* laid some of their clothing on the back of the animal to cushion Jesus’ ride. Without a saddle or stirrups, *Jesus* probably had to be lifted onto the back of the animal. It doesn’t seem like a given that *the colt* would remain docile as Jesus rode it. Perhaps this animal recognized Jesus as the ruler of the universe and behaved accordingly.

B. Reaction (vv. 8–9)

8. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The description *a very large crowd* can be understood as “the largest of crowds.” Matthew knows of a crowd of 5,000 men (not counting women and children) that came to hear Jesus in Galilee ([Matthew 14:21](#)), and this Passover crowd seems to be even larger. This is the biggest thing happening in Jerusalem that day, with perhaps 10,000 or more people lining Jesus’ path to the city. It is likely that many were from the Galilee region.

Speculation was buzzing about if and when Jesus would come ([John 11:55–57](#)). Jesus did not stir up the crowd; their celebration was a spontaneous act by the people who had been anticipating his arrival. The nature of this event was contagious, and the crowd responded by

paving the triumphal path of Jesus with their own *cloaks* and with freshly cut *branches*. John identifies those as coming from palm trees ([John 12:13](#)). The phrase *spread them* brings to mind the strewing of fresh, clean straw in a stable or in a house that has a dirt floor.

John tells us that the crowd also *cut* palm branches or fronds and waved these as they went out to meet Jesus ([John 12:13](#)). Normally this behavior was reserved to honor nobility. Crowds of people had welcomed the Jewish hero Simon Maccabeus in a similar manner some 110 years before (see the nonbiblical [1 Maccabees 13:51](#)). The people demonstrated their belief that Jesus was more than just another prophet or rabbi.

Since palm fronds grow at the very top of the trees, the people must have gone to considerable effort to cut them for this occasion. This action is the basis for observing the day of Jesus' triumphal entry as Palm Sunday.

What Do You Think?

How does it encourage you to be with a crowd of people who are praising Jesus?

Digging Deeper

What pitfalls do you see if the *only* time you worship is with others?

9a. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

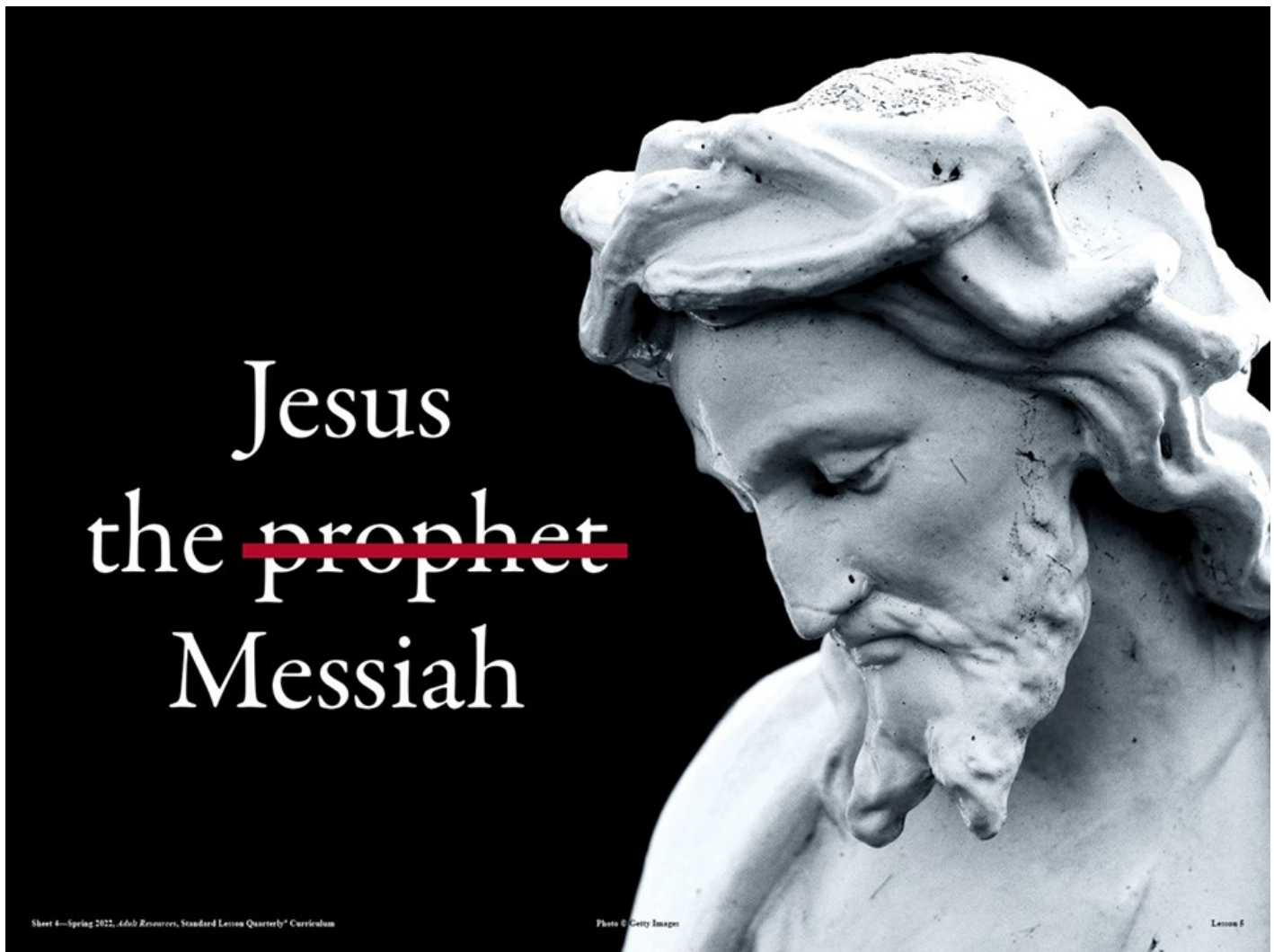
The acclamation of the multitudes has three parts (see [Matthew 21:9b–c](#), below), all pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah. All four Gospel accounts record Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (see [Lesson Context](#)), and these accounts present some interesting variations. Both Matthew and Mark indicate that two groups made up the crowd that accompanied Jesus: those *that went ahead* came out from Jerusalem to meet him ([John 12:12–13](#)), while *those that followed* had come from Bethany with him.

9b. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

The word *Hosanna*, a Hebrew term that means “save,” is associated with the Hallel (“praise”) [psalms \(113–118\)](#), especially [Psalm 118:25–26](#). These particular psalms were associated with the Festival of Tabernacles, which celebrated the Lord's delivering Israel from Egypt. Echoes of deliverance permeated the people's celebrating Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. They hoped that he would save them from Rome in a way similar to their historic deliverance from Egypt.

The people's acclamation of Jesus as *the Son of David* was a clear reference to God's promise to David and his lineage (see [2 Samuel 7](#); [Psalm 89:3–4](#)). The crowd seemed to know that Jesus was in the line of David (Matthew see [1:1, 6](#); contrast the uncertainty of a previous occasion in [John 7:41–42](#)). The Gospel of John makes this knowledge even more explicit, record-

ing that the crowd also hailed Jesus as “king of Israel” (12:13).



Visual for [Lessons 5](#). Before closing the class with prayer, allow the learners one minute to consider how they continue to seek after Jesus.

The people at the triumphal entry clearly anticipated great things from a king who *comes in the name of the Lord*. But they did not yet realize or appreciate how Jesus’ kingship would differ from every monarch they had ever known. Nor did they know Jesus’ absolute worthiness to receive such praise and worship. The Pharisees understood the threat of the people’s adoration, however, and regarded their behavior as worthy of rebuke ([Luke 19:37–44](#)).

What Do You Think?

What situations cause you to cry out for God’s deliverance?

Digging Deeper

How do you react when God responds to your petition differently than you had wanted?

9c. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

The highest heaven refers to God’s dwelling place (example: [Luke 2:14](#)). The people were asking God to hear them from his home and to act on their behalf. Little did they know that Immanuel was with them, not far removed.

Luke tells us that some of the religious leaders demanded that Jesus silence the enthusiastic crowd. Jesus responded, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out” ([Luke 19:40](#)). Luke also informs us that Jesus stopped before he entered the city and wept as he predicted the tragic future that awaited Jerusalem ([19:41–44](#)).

Jesus did not silence the people, but neither did he take time to explain to them everything they didn’t understand about him. Then as now, Jesus can truly be known only when we accept the truth that he was crucified, died, and then rose from the grave ([1 Corinthians 1:22–25](#)). He brought God’s kingdom close, and he showed through his life, death, and resurrection that citizenship in his kingdom is different from that of any earthly nation. (Consider Jesus’ teaching in [Matthew 5–7](#).) No amount of preaching to the people would be as persuasive concerning Jesus’ identity and purpose as would the way he died and the miracle of his rising back to life.

C. Identity (vv. 10–11)

10. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The Jewish pilgrims who found lodging outside the city for the holiday (as Jesus and his disciples had) would walk into *Jerusalem* each day of the weeklong celebration. On this day, many such pilgrims accompanied Jesus into the city ([Matthew 21:9a](#), above), and the commotion was so great that *the whole city* noticed. The question of the day, though, was not “What’s happening?” but “*Who is this?*”

That question is profound and has lasting consequences for faith and discipleship. In order to give his disciples greater insight into his identity, Jesus had asked them who people said he was ([Matthew 16:13–14](#)). The disciples mentioned various prophets (see [21:11](#), below). When Jesus asked the disciples who *they* believed he was, Peter confessed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” ([16:15–16](#)). Even so, Peter did not understand what this meant or how dangerous this confession would prove to be. Still, Jesus declared that on the truth of this great confession the church would be built. Only by accepting Jesus as he disclosed himself—not just as a prophet or teacher but as Savior and Messiah—can a person truly follow Jesus and the church remain faithful to him.

11. The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Despite the previous acclamation of Jesus as “Son of David,” *the crowds* gave a somewhat

tamer answer to the question of [Matthew 21:10](#), above. The crowd identified him by name (*Jesus*), by hometown (*Nazareth in.o Galilee*), and by special vocation (*prophet*), but there is no language of Jesus as Messiah or king. Even so, the designation of Jesus as a prophet seems to have had a powerful effect on the city; it is the reason the Jewish leaders plotted carefully and secretly to have Jesus arrested ([Matthew 21:46](#)).

What Do You Think?

What opportunities does incomplete understanding of Jesus' identity offer in evangelization?

Digging Deeper

What challenges are presented by the same incomplete knowledge?

CHEERING FOR ... HIM?

P. T. Barnum (1810–1891) of Barnum & Bailey Circus fame was a master showman who entertained Americans for many decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His hometown of Bridgeport, Connecticut, has held an annual Barnum festival and parade for the last 75 years to honor their native son.

My friend Len was a banker in the Bridgeport area before he retired. While I was in Bridgeport one year, the grand marshal—Len—invited me to ride with him on the grand marshal's float. No one in the crowd knew me, but they cheered anyway. I was riding with the grand marshal, so I basked in their acclaim as if I deserved it.

Many joined Jesus' "parade" to Jerusalem. And when the crowd cheered, I suspect that, like the crowd in Bridgeport, many were caught up in the spirit of the celebration. But Jesus deserved their praise, even though many didn't know who he really was. So celebrate Jesus, whatever you know of him—but also seek to know him better. You'll find even more reason to cheer.

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Faith on Parade

Hearing the story of Jesus always leaves us with a question: Who is he? Just a good teacher, basing his lessons on God's laws? No more than a prophet, given insight from the Lord? Or is he the Son of God, the promised Messiah, sent to save the world from sin and death? Based on our answer, we also have a decision to make: Will we follow?

On days like the one described in this lesson, following Jesus is not just the right thing to

do; it's the joyful thing! We want to follow Christ when he is being celebrated by everyone we know. And indeed, following Jesus is the path of life to the fullest ([John 10:10b](#); [14:6](#)).

But we must not forget that Jesus was heading to the cross. All of us experience great happiness, but sorrow, pain, betrayal, and loss will still befall us, as they did Jesus. This is not an exception to a good life; it is a fact of living in a world marred by sin. Will we still follow when we know that Jesus might be leading us to more pain than if we simply watched him pass by? What gives us staying power when others lay down their palm branches and reach instead for stones ([John 8:59](#))?

Growing in our knowledge of Jesus and our relationship with him helps us choose to follow his lead every day. Our preparation for extraordinary struggle begins in ordinary preparations: spending time in the Word and in prayer, seeking the Spirit's guidance; worshipping with the body of Christ, and lamenting too; serving our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, and our enemies. May we celebrate Jesus in all circumstances and follow him, even to death.

B. Prayer

Dear Lord, thank you for sending Jesus, your Son, to save us from our sins. May we always praise him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Hosanna in the highest! Jesus has come.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Set up a scenario in which a celebrity comes to your town and your class is in charge of hosting that person for a weekend. Divide learners into groups of five. Ask each group to decide on a specific reason the visitor is a celebrity. Examples include all-star athletes, award-winning actors, best-selling writers, etc. Each group needs to create an agenda, plan meals, provide lodging, reserve spaces for events, and supply transportation. Give a 10-minute limit for them to come up with a basic weekend plan. Allow time to discuss the plans with the whole class, especially any differences based on the kind of celebrity who was hosted.

Alternative. Distribute the “Monarch for a Day” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Allow learners one minute to work individually before pairing up to complete the activity and discuss.

After either of these activities, say, “Important people often are given special treatment. Today we will look closely at a story about how Jesus chose to present himself and the way others received him.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Matthew 21:1–11](#). Tell the class that they will develop a full issue of a daily newspaper in Jerusalem, based on the events of today’s passage. Invite the learners to brainstorm ideas for the paper’s title.

Once a title is chosen, divide the class into pairs or small groups. Give each group one of these assignments plus a possible article title to get them started:

Advice Column Group: “How to Plan Your Royal Entrance”

Celebrity Profile Group: “The Prophet from Nazareth”

Police Report Group: “Not-Quite-Stolen Livestock”

Public Survey Group: “False Prophet or Prophecy Fulfilled?”

Political Analysis Group: “Son of David: New King in Town?”

Traffic Report Group: “Crowds, Cloaks, Colts, and Cut Branches Create Chaos”

Option: If there are any artists in the class, a **Comic Strip** or **Feature Photo Group** can be formed.

Suggest that quotes or statistics can be created as long as they do not contradict the facts in the passage. Allow 15–20 minutes for the learners to create their pieces and submit them to the editorial team (the whole class) for review.

Into Life

To wrap up the newspaper issue, ask each pair or small group to write a letter to the editor in the form of a poem, prayer, or devotional thought, reflecting on what was seen and reported. The content should be from the learners’ own points of view, as people reading the account of the triumphal entry from many years in the future and who know what happened in the following week. Allow 10 minutes for them to create their pieces before discussing these briefly as a class.

Option. Compile all the pieces into an official format (examples: in a binder, folder, or pasted on larger pieces of paper), and invite the whole group to reflect on this creative project.

Alternative. Distribute the “Who Is This?” exercise from the activity page to be completed

according to the instructions. Encourage participants to take the exercise home this week, pray over it, and write down their responses. Also ask them to bring it back to share with the whole group next week.

Close the class by playing “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” (available on the internet) or another appropriate song. Give thanks in prayer for Jesus’ saving work on the cross.