

The Garden of Opportunity

Luke 19:28-44

INTRODUCTION

Here we are. T-minus seven days until Easter! Today is, of course, Palm Sunday, the first day of the last week of Jesus' earthly life – at least His earthly life before His resurrection. He will make several appearances here on earth after Easter Sunday right up to the day we call Ascension Sunday (which we celebrate on June 1), forty days after Easter.

This will be a busy week for Jesus:

- Sunday—Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem
- Monday—Cleansing the temple
- Tuesday—Controversies with the Jewish leaders
- Wednesday—Judas makes a deal to betray Him
- Thursday—Preparation for Passover (Last Supper)
- Friday—Trial and Crucifixion
- Saturday—Jesus rests in the tomb
- Sunday—Jesus raised from the dead

By the time we gather next Sunday, all of that will have happened. Today, though, is the day it all starts. It is the beginning of the end. Up to this time in His 33 years of life, Jesus had preferred to remain out of the limelight. You heard that preference conveyed in this constant theme He used whenever He performed a miracle:

Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. (Mark 7:36)

Today is the only time in His three-year public ministry that Jesus permitted any kind of demonstration on His behalf, and He did so for at least two reasons.

- First, He was fulfilling Old Testament prophecy by presenting Himself as Israel's king. He is the One all the prophets were talking about.
 - How much of this the crowd really understood we cannot tell.
 - They did quote from a messianic psalm (Psalm 118:25–26) when they sang their praises.
 - And no doubt many of the Passover pilgrims thought that Jesus was coming into town to get rid of the Roman invaders and establish the glorious kingdom of David all over again.
- The second reason for this demonstration was to give everyone one final opportunity to decide for themselves who He was.

These weeks leading up to Easter you and I have been on a journey from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of the Empty Tomb. Along the way we have been learning about the devastating impact that sin has on our world and in our lives. Next week our journey will end in the Garden of the Empty Tomb where we will celebrate the resurrection.

As a part of our Lenten journey, I have asked you to memorize our theme verse for this year, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

I keep telling you that those words are important because the entire story of our redemption is the story of two gardens – from Garden to Garden. From Eden to the Empty Tomb. This memory verse illustrates that truth by associating two men with those two gardens: Adam and Jesus.

As we get closer to the Garden of the Empty Tomb, Jesus leads us into today's Garden of Opportunity.

#1: PALM SUNDAY WAS AN OPPORTUNITY OFFERED

This was Passover time. Passover was one of three mandatory festivals for the Jewish people. Every adult male was obligated by Law to be present in the city for this festival.

While it is challenging to determine the exact number, experts estimate that the city's population would swell during major religious festivals. Passover would especially draw between 500,000 to a million people. The normal population was approximately 50,000 – so about 10 to 20 times greater.

Everyone was there.

- There were, of course, the regular band of disciples – maybe even most of the 70 Jesus had sent out two-by-two a few months earlier.
- There were the crowds of people that had been trailing Him, watching for another miracle like the feeding of the 5,000.
- There were the pilgrims from outside of the region who had never heard Jesus speak.
- There were the nationalistic radicals who were hoping this Triumphal entry signaled a political overthrowing of the Roman government.
- And there were the Pharisees and other religious leaders who were watching for a chance to arrest Jesus as a troublemaker and get rid of Him.

All of these people had differing opinions as to who Jesus was. Yet to all these people, friend and foe alike, the Triumphal Entry offered one more chance to see Jesus as the Promised Messiah – the fulfillment of prophecy.

- Everything about this day – every detail – had been predicted by the Old Testament prophets, and it was all coming true.

Earlier Jesus had asked His disciples...

Who do you say I am? (Matthew 16:15)

On this day, everyone in the city is confronted with an OPPORTUNITY to answer this same question for themselves. How will they answer?

How do you answer that question?

- One of the evangelism techniques I learned many years ago opened with this question:

Who is Jesus Christ to you?

Those along the Palm Sunday parade route may have answered that question with ...

- A troublemaker
- A prophet
- A military leader who will overthrow the Romans
- A miracle worker, teacher
- If Peter and the rest of the disciples repeated their response from earlier, they would have said "The Savior of the World."

That's the only correct answer, and today is the day everyone is offered the opportunity to make that confession.

#2: PALM SUNDAY WAS AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

Unfortunately, this turned out to be a missed opportunity. Even for the disciples ... because like nearly everyone else, they would abandon Jesus by the end of the week.

In the year 1269 Kublai Khan sent a request from Peking to Rome requesting "a hundred wise men of the Christian religion." He added that if these 100 wise men would come "I shall be baptized, and when I shall be baptized all my baron and great men will be baptized, and their subjects baptized, and so there will be more Christians here than there are in your parts."

At that point in history the Mongols were wavering in the choice of their religion. It might have been, as Kublai forecast, the greatest mass religious movement the world has ever seen. The history of all Asia would have been changed.

But what actually happened? Pope Gregory X answered by sending two Dominican friars. They got as far as Armenia, could endure the hardships of the journey no longer, so they turned around and went back to Rome. So passed the greatest missionary opportunity in the history of the church. A major opportunity missed.

This did not surprise Jesus. While the crowd was rejoicing, our text tells us that Jesus was weeping!

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it. (Luke 19:41)

This is the second occasion on which our Lord wept openly, the first being at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35).

- There He wept quietly, but here He uttered a loud lamentation like one mourning over the dead.

Here on Palm Sunday, He was like the Prophet Jeremiah who wept bitterly over the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 9:1ff; see also the Book of Lamentations). Jonah looked on Nineveh and hoped it would be destroyed (Jonah 4), while Jesus looked at Jerusalem and wept because it had destroyed itself.

No matter where Jesus looked, He found cause for weeping.

- If He looked *back*, He saw how the nation had wasted its opportunities and been ignorant of their “time of visitation.”
- If He looked *within*, He saw spiritual ignorance and blindness in the hearts of the people. They should have known who He was, for God had given them His Word and sent His messengers to prepare the way.
- As He looked *around*, Jesus saw religious activity that accomplished very little. The temple had become a den of thieves, and the religious leaders were out to kill Him. The city was filled with pilgrims celebrating a festival, but the hearts of the people were heavy with sin and life's burdens.
- As Jesus looked *ahead*, He wept as He saw the terrible judgment that was coming to the nation, the city, and the temple. In A.D. 70, the Romans would come and, after a siege of 143 days, kill 600,000 Jews, take thousands more captive, and then destroy the temple and the city.

Why did all of this happen? Because the Jewish people missed their opportunity to confess Jesus as Lord.

APPLICATION

In Greek mythology, Kairos is the name of the god of time. There is a famous sculpture of this god with a sign on it to explain its meaning. Among the many elements described on that sign are these two:

- Kairos is on his tiptoes because he is ever running – passing by quickly. “Time flies.” Opportunities come and go quickly.
- Kairos also has long wavy hair on the front of his head so that wise people can grab on as the opportunity approaches, but Kairos is bald on the back of his head because once opportunity has passed, it is too late.
 - This gave rise to an expression that “Opportunity is bald from behind.”
Once it's past, you can't get it back!

The call of faith in this Lenten season is best communicated in these words from Ephesians 5:

Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. (Ephesians 5:16)

Amen.