

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

John 12:12–15, English Standard Version.

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!”

To a Kid of Cement and Steel: *The donkey as a symbol of peace and royalty.*

Most of you have probably been wondering for some time if I have ever ridden a donkey. Well, sadly enough, the answer is no. I have, however, encountered donkeys twice in my life that I can recall, and the experiences have taught me about two important qualities of donkeys. The first time I saw a donkey was when I was a boy growing up in Oxnard, California. I was very much a city kid, and so were my friends; we were kids of cement and steel. When I was little, I thought that beans, like lima and pinto, were made in a factory. I’m serious. I thought someone manufactured the skins and then stuffed them with bean mush. There were, however, a couple of kids in my class who lived on the outside of town, on one of the few small farms that still existed in the area back then. What’s funny is that I picked lemons with migrant workers when I was a kid. I also

would ride my bike with my buddies to the edge of town, where we rode on the access roads between the fields and the rows of tall, sweet-smelling eucalyptus trees that acted as windbreaks. I would ride right past berries, green beans, and lettuce, but I learned almost nothing about how food was grown. Food came from the grocery store. I was such a city kid that I never mapped my experience with lemon trees to the source of any other sort of food. I did one day, however, while riding my bike with a friend, encounter a man on a donkey. That's the first time I can remember seeing a donkey. I will get back to this story and tell you exactly what happened. Decades later, as I was writing this message, this donkey very much reminded me of the donkey as a symbol of peace in the Bible.

The other time I came across a donkey, it was multiple donkeys, and it was many, many years later, and again, I did not ride any of them. Wendy and I were in Greece a several years ago and we were on an island called Santorini. It's a beautiful place. The terrain is a bit steep, and many tourists opt to ride donkeys. They are apparently very sure footed, docile, and unbelievably patient with panicky American tourists who are convinced that the donkeys will dump them off the sides of the steep paths. Wendy and I chose to walk up and down the narrow switchbacks, sometimes climbing broad stairs, but we passed a lot of people on donkeys, or rather, they passed us. What struck me was the

appearance of those donkeys. If you look at the picture on the overhead, you will see two of the Santorini Island donkeys, waiting to be ridden. They have colorful blankets and head ornaments on them. In their regal calmness, they made me think of the symbol of royalty that donkeys provide in the Bible.

Jesus was tried, crucified and then arose from the dead to commission the Apostles with these words, which are the last words of the Gospel of Matthew:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Before this, just a handful of days before he was killed, Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, something we celebrate on Palm Sunday. This is an edited version of what we read in the Gospel of Matthew:

21 *Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,*

*⁵ “Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’ ”*

⁸ The crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut palm branches and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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 ended up bringing a Heavenly kingdom, a spiritual kingdom.

But why did Jesus cruise into Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews, on a donkey? Okay, they didn’t have nickel mines to make batteries for golf carts. And Uber had not yet made its way from California to Jerusalem. But seriously, why not a horse? They certainly had horses, and it would have been far more regal and far more fitting for 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. 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 is abridged:

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

As some background, 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 son of Saul, the previous king. 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. And importantly, 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.

Consider the following quote, Zechariah 9:9, from the ESV. Zechariah prophesized in the period after the Babylonian exile. He emphasizes that salvation will come to the People of God when the Temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians, is rebuilt. Our quote is a prophecy by Zechariah that says that once God defeats the enemies of Israel, God will send a righteous king. This king will unite the divided subkingdoms of Israel and then will form a peaceful dominion over all the peoples of the Earth. This king will be humble, but just so that there is no doubt about his rank and his power, he will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

⁹*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Now... wait a second. Does that sound familiar? Let's look at a passage from the Gospel of John. All four Gospels describe this event. Matthew and John both reference this passage we just read from Zechariah 9. Here is John's version, specifically John 12:12–15, from the ESV:

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!"*

As we have seen so many times before, the New Testament references the Old Testament. The people of Jesus' day, especially people in Jerusalem, who were Jewish, would have easily recognized this reference to Zechariah, which makes it clear that the Christ Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of an ancient prophesy whereby a humble king will ride a donkey into Jerusalem and then bring about a new kingdom. It's just that these people, during both Zechariah's time and Jesus' time – and there is about six hundred years between the two – thought that this would be an earthly kingdom. They thought that Jesus would conquer the enemies of Israel, which during Jesus' day, were the Romans, and institute a new, peaceful Jewish theocracy run by the laws of God, not the brutal laws of Rome.

Let's continue with this notion of a humble, but extremely powerful, king. Consider Psalm 33:16-17, from the ESV. It is often used in Christian services, and it is attributed to King David. It is a hymn of praise, focusing on God as the great creator. The thing to note about our passage is that in the biblical world, horses were not used for agriculture or lay transportation. Horses were used for pulling chariots into battle, and as a result, the horse was the favorite symbol of the military. This quote makes it clear that no army, no war horse, no earthly king – despite his military power – can save us. Only God can do that.

- ¹⁶ The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.*
- ¹⁷ The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.*

So, we see that it makes perfect sense for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. It was the peaceful form of transportation for a king who is secure in his ways and humble in his attitude. It was also an extraordinarily poetic and symbolic thing for Jesus to do. Everyone who saw him ride into Jerusalem knew from ancient Scripture, from the words of the prophets and of the ancient Psalmists, that Jesus was the King who would save all of us.

Getting back to the Santorini donkeys, their owners seemed to have a sort of competition, to see who could outfit their donkeys in the most beautiful way.

They looked like they were prepared for King David and his entourage or for the king whom the prophet Zechariah said would one day come and save all the Israelites. Or maybe like the donkey that Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem. I could easily see these beautiful animals walking over the palm branches laid down by the throngs who had come to welcome their savior, their ancient, promised Messiah - up until the point that I took a close look at the faces of these donkeys that were regally carrying clumsy tourists up a series of steep switchbacks. You see, you may not be able to tell from the picture, but both of them have wire mesh muzzles on them. No, this is not to keep them from biting Americans. It's to keep them from eating random greenery they happen by, or at least this is what the people who rent out these animals told us.

Let's look at the Gospel of Luke, at what Jesus says just as he is about to ride into Jerusalem on his regal donkey. This is from Chapter 19:

⁴¹ And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side ⁴⁴ and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

There are a few ways of looking at this. Jerusalem means "*house of peace*", and yet this is not going to be the future of Jerusalem. For one thing, in the year

70 A.D., about thirty-five years after this happens, Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans under King Titus. But Jesus also knew that he wasn't going to build an earthly empire and save Jerusalem from its enemies forever. He knew that these people didn't understand who he was or what he was trying to do. They didn't know that he would very soon be killed – and that any hope that the Jews of Israel had of the Roman Empire being swept aside by a powerful, ruthless king would be dashed. Jesus also knew that his people would not live sinless lives, that over and over, they would drift into evil ways of living. In fact, the people who were now laying down palm branches for his donkey to walk upon would soon be complicit in his death. These people who are asking him to rescue them would crucify him. Jesus was weeping for the city, for its occupants, and to all who would follow – including us. That is perhaps the big lesson of Christianity: that our God knows that we will do wrong, knows that we will behave in selfish ways. But rather than responding with blind wrath, God will weep for us. That's how much our God loves us. The best thing we can do as people of faith is to accept with joy the kingdom that Jesus is bringing about – and to understand that this is an incredible gift, one that allows us to live in joy now and forever. This kingdom is led by the humble king who had to borrow the donkey he regally rode into the City of Peace.

I know that you've been listening to all of this simply so you could learn about the first time I encountered a donkey, when I was perhaps ten and was riding my bike on the edge of town. My friend and I saw a man riding a donkey down the middle of an unplanted field. This could have been in the winter, I don't know. Just as we were riding past, and I recall thinking, wow, that man is actually riding a donkey, my buddy hit the coaster brake on his bike and slid to a stop in the dirt on the access road next to the line of eucalyptus trees. I stopped, as well. My friend pointed at the man and the donkey and shouted "What's that? Is that a horse?" Mind you, I was the one who thought that beans were stuffed in a factory by some machine. I said *it's a donkey*. He said *a what?* I said, *you know, like Jesus rode in the Bible, a donkey*. We never figured out why the man was riding a donkey, and I don't recall ever seeing the donkey again.

Yes, I was a southern Californian boy, a kid of cement and steel, and I was the one who identified a farm animal to someone. But the man who was on that donkey was an older man, and perhaps he was the farm owner, somehow inspecting his field. I do remember that he seemed very calm as that animal lumbered on, carefully stepping through the uneven terrain. There is something about donkeys, with their stubby legs, their big ears, and their sagging bellies that make them look very much like the ultimate symbol of peace.