

April 17th 2011:Palm Sunday #3 “The Day Jesus Threw Down The Gauntlet” John 12

Late last February, so I'm told, Sony suddenly cut the price of its top selling Play station by 24%. It happened just weeks before the much advertised release of Nintendo's 3DS. There was nothing hidden about Sony's motive. It was a direct challenge to the rival company that they were ready to battle for a market that is worth billions. The journalist called it, "Throwing down the Gauntlet at Nintendo".

To throw down the gauntlet is an idiom in the English language. It means to invite someone to argue, fight, or compete with you. There is no doubt that such was the intention of Sony here and there is little doubt that such was also the intention of Jesus on Palm Sunday.

He knew that the hour had at last come when the powers of evil would be forced to pit their might against the power of righteousness. And He had no intention of avoiding that. Instead He did the very things that would lead to His arrest and handing over to the Romans for execution. Palm Sunday was the Day when Jesus Threw Down The Gauntlet.

As far as the Jewish leaders were concerned Jesus had already become more than just a nuisance. He was a threat that they wanted to get rid of permanently. A week or so before this we read in John 11 that the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin where they said— John 11:47-48

"What are we accomplishing? Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

It was also at that meeting that Caiaphas made the famous statement-v50

"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

So murder was definitely in their hearts even then, but Jesus' reaction, according to v54, was to no longer move publicly among the Jews but to withdraw to a desert region where no one could find Him. That was until the day before Palm Sunday. Then on that day, John tells us, Jesus arrived at Bethany. He came back to the place where He had raised Lazarus from the dead, and people just surged there to see Him. John 12: 9-11 says:-

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, ¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

Jesus knew what would happen when He went to Bethany. He knew that the crowd would come and He used that to His advantage. It was as though He pressed all the buttons that generated fear and anger in the chief priests and other leaders. They saw the crowd gathering so close to Jerusalem which was itself jammed full with pilgrims, and they dreaded what could happen next.

And happen it did. The very next day Jesus started His journey from Bethany with the crowd that had gathered there already with Him. On the way to Jerusalem He had the donkey brought to Him. Then, as He and the crowd began to descend down the Mount of Olives towards the city gates, the pilgrims in Jerusalem—and many of them had come from Galilee—heard what was happening, and came out of the city to join with the crowd of followers already accompanying Jesus.

The number of people; the noise; the hosannas; the enthusiasm; would have been a frightening sight for the enemies of Jesus. John writes in 12:17-19

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word.

Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

The Gospels tell us that after the events of Palm Sunday the Jewish leaders talked together about arresting Jesus, but they realized that they couldn't do so because of the people. The same crowds that had forced them into their decision to arrest Jesus and end His life, were now the reason that they couldn't act, because they feared a riot if they did.

If was at that point that Satan, who had been actively working against Jesus all the time in more insidious ways, now begins to make His move. Luke 22:1-3

Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, ² and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were

looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. ³ Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.

Of course we all know what happened next. Judas agreed to betray his friend Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and then waited for the opportunity to do so. And it is John who confirmed this underlying influence of evil by telling us that at the Last Supper Satan entered into Judas.

The Son of Man threw down the gauntlet on Palm Sunday and the evil one accepts the challenge that will culminate with the happenings of Good Friday. Was Satan backed into a corner by Jesus? I think so. Jesus proclaimed quite early in His ministry as recorded in John 10:17-19:-

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

This laying down of His own life included all that happened before the cross as well as on the cross. It included His fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 on Palm Sunday as He rode into Jerusalem. John writes about this in John 12:14-15

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

¹⁵ “Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.”

Notice the wording of that prophecy. “See your king is coming”. Nothing can be clearer than that. Not only was He fulfilling a 500 year old prophecy He was also declaring His kingship. He was throwing down the gauntlet. Challenging the Jewish leaders yes, but much more than that. Challenging Satan to attempt to de-throne Him.

And for Jesus this was no unrealistic act of bravado. He knew that victory over evil was already His, but He also knew the pain and suffering He would need to endure to make that victory over sin and death—over hell and judgment—available to you and me.

As Palm Sunday came to an end Jesus made this bold assertion in John 12:31-33

Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Today death still exists for every human being. We shall all die, that is certain, unless the Lord returns first.

Today judgment and hell still exist. The death of Christ has not changed the reality of their existence, and they are still the ultimate destination of every human being. But what the death of Christ has done is to make a way of escape for those who are prepared to add to their Faith in Him as God the Son, their commitment to follow Him.

Palm Sunday proclaimed Jesus as the King over all powers and principalities, come into the world to give us the rescue that we so desperately need. The question we need to answer for ourselves is, “is He truly my King”?

Because of our trust in Him we rightly see Him as our Saviour, our Friend, our Redeemer, but it was as King that He went to the cross. And it is as King that He demands of those who would follow Him, complete obedience, commitment, and a readiness to lay down our lives for our Sovereign Lord.

King of my life, I crown Thee now,
Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow,
Lead me to Calvary.

May I be willing, Lord, to bear
Daily my cross for Thee;
Even Thy cup of grief to share,
Thou hast bourn all for me.

