

The Paradox of Palm Sunday: Strength is found in Weakness

Dear Friends,

“Please be careful,” her father said as he left the town home she had just moved into, “This is a dangerous neighborhood! You really should think about getting a dog, or an alarm system.” “Oh don’t worry dad,” she said, my cat will protect me.” Wise move? “Are you sure you want to go over there?” A good friend said to a young man on his way to Iran. “Oh I’ll be fine,” he said. “Their police would never let anything bad happen to an American.” Wise move? “Don’t worry about us,” said the couple to their friends as they left for a cross country journey to visit their children. “Our beat up rusty station wagon has never let us down.” Wise move? It’s never a wise move to trust in weakness is it? A cat can’t protect your house, the Columbian authorities can’t do much to keep you from harm, and a beat up rusty station wagon won’t take you across the Rockies. Conventional wisdom says that we trust in strength, right? Yet throughout the pages of the Bible we find this paradox, this apparent contradiction: God’s people are asked to find strength in apparent weakness. Listen as the Prophet Zechariah describes the coming messiah’s journey into Jerusalem hundreds of years before it happened and see if you can identify the paradox.

Zechariah 9:9-10 ⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. **10** I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Did you catch it? It’s the phrases **righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey**. They would seem to contradict each other. Yet this strength amidst weakness is exactly what we see play out on Palm Sunday. Now perhaps we don’t usually associate Palm Sunday with weakness. After all, the crowds are cheering for Jesus. And they put their cloaks out for him to ride on—an impressive show of respect. But take your eye off the crowds for one minute, and look at Jesus. His behavior on this occasion doesn’t seem to be that of the strong powerful king that those shouting thought they were welcoming. Let’s start with his ride. Can you imagine arriving at your wedding in a rusted out 70s AMC Gremlin? Well that’s the equivalent of what’s going on here. Jesus riding in on the foal of a donkey? That is not the picture of glamour or strength; it’s almost comical. But it’s exactly what Zechariah foretold. And he wrote those words at a time when people were hoping for God to show his power—to send someone to restore Israel to what it had been. Well, God promises to send a savior, but even in the prophecies about Jesus, it is clear that while his coming will achieve victory and righteousness, it will have the appearance of weakness. Even from the get go, it must have struck many people as odd that this Jesus who had done his greatest miracle yet in raising Lazarus from the dead after he had begun to decay chose to make his big entrance on a juvenile donkey.

How about what Jesus said—or more accurately, what he didn’t say? What if at the next State of the Union address, as all of congress and the whole entourage gathered and the news cameras rolled – lights bearing down, our president just came out, waved, and then left? To say the least it would be a let-down, people would be furious. Well that’s about what happens on Palm Sunday. The people are watching, waiting, anxious. You can just picture them waiting to hear him speak as he had done so many times before, maybe a parable, maybe another tongue lashing for the Pharisees, maybe the voice of his Father in heaven. Nope, he says almost nothing. No big speech or sermon. What a let-down. Again, the outward appearance of weakness.

And how about what Jesus did? After all, you don’t have to speak to communicate effectively. Sometimes actions say enough. You don’t have to give a speech to lead an army into battle, sometimes picking up your sword and being the first to charge at the enemy is all it takes. Jesus must have done something like that right? Nope. He marches in, and then he’s done. Didn’t charge the Roman fortress, didn’t charge at the Pharisees. Didn’t yell “freedom,” and lead the charge against the Roman occupiers of Jerusalem. The whole ending seems anticlimactic, weak.

I imagine there were quite a few people who walked away disappointed, but whether they knew it or not, they were right to shout “Hosanna” (which means “save us”) because Jesus was able to save them. They were right to call him David’s heir, their king, their messiah—he was. And the very “weakness” he displayed on that ride was necessary if he was to be the king they needed. In fact you might say that it took great strength to show such weakness.

Let’s look again at that ride. Why didn’t Jesus pick a white horse, a golden chariot? It’s because he didn’t come to be an earthly king. He’s showing that he is different. He didn’t come to amass wealth or impress his competition, he didn’t come to make himself great. He came to make us great. And let’s not lose sight of the fact that the specific details of that ride were the fulfillment of yet another prophecy. It’s a wise move to trust that man riding on a donkey.

Look again at what Jesus said, or didn’t say. He doesn’t have to say anything. The people shouting “Hosanna” (save us), “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”, “Hosanna, to the Son of David”, was all that needed to be said. They shouted it, and he didn’t stop them. In fact, in some of the few words he does speak on that day, he answered the Pharisees who tell him to silence the crowd, that if he did, the very stones would cry out. It was a wise move to trust that man saying so little.

Now look again at what Jesus is doing. No, he’s not leading a rebellion. No, he didn’t storm the Roman fortress. But he was charging into battle. A battle he knew could only be won with his sacrifice. You know how that old saying goes, how can you tell who

the firefighters and police are at the scene of disaster? They're the ones running towards it while everyone else is running away. As Jesus enters the city, just the fact that he came to Jerusalem is an incredible act of strength and will, because he knew he was going there to be sacrificed, so that we would escape the punishment for sin. It was a wise move to trust in that man who didn't seem to do much.

Those who put their faith in Jesus that day might have looked like fools at the time, especially when Jesus was killed 5 days later, but they were really the wise ones. Jesus may not have given them what they expected on that day, but 7 days later, he gave them a possession greater than anyone could have imagined, a "get out of death free" card.

In many ways, you and I are in a similar situation. From the standpoint of the casual observer, we Christians are trusting in weakness. As on that day, Jesus' followers often find that they look weak to others. How about our "ride" in life? While there are wealthy and healthy Christians, there are many Christians who are not particularly wealthy, some are very poor. There are plenty who pray to God for good health, or a successful surgery, but don't get it. The same percentage of Christians die in car accidents and from cancer as the general population. In many places Christians are still persecuted and even killed. To most, that looks like weakness.

It also might appear to many that Jesus doesn't say enough. The last book of the Bible was written almost 2,000 years ago. Why aren't we seeing visions? Why aren't we dreaming dreams? Why doesn't Jesus present us with a new apostle? Why aren't new books being written? Why doesn't he say anything? His seeming silence seems weak to many.

And it might appear like Jesus doesn't do much anymore. Why isn't he helping the Christians in Sudan? Why doesn't he send a huge earthquake or fireball or a legion of angels and do away with the groups who are killing Christians or worshipping other Gods? Why doesn't he send lightning down and disable all the internet porn sites? Why doesn't he crush his opposition? Why doesn't he do anything? He must be weak! At least that's what many think. And let's be honest, we think it too sometimes, don't we? Who of us hasn't had that moment when we've wondered – "Is God really in my corner?"

Well let's take a closer look at what so many see as weakness. It's true, Christians do struggle, Christians do suffer, and Christians aren't always or often rich. Our "ride" isn't usually glamorous. But Jesus never promised that it would be. In fact, he said be ready to struggle, but he's told us why. Material things really don't give us the strength we seek. He says store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust don't destroy and thieves don't come and steal. Good health? That will only last so long, we will still die. That's what we need a cure for. Christians and their churches might well look weak to society, but every Christian possesses a treasure that makes him or her among the wealthiest people in the world. Christ gave each Christian a mansion in heaven. It will be standing long after the White House, the Capital, the pyramids, and Notre Dame are nothing but dust and ashes. It's still a wise move to trust this man who rode on a donkey.

It's also true that Jesus isn't giving us more apostles and bible books today, but is that really weakness? All that needs to be said has been said. If your rich uncle promises you a million bucks, writes the check, and puts it in holding account, and gives you a copy of his will, does he need to keep writing you letters restating that fact? No – you might look at the deposit slip or read the codicil of his will to keep on reminding you what is waiting, but once he gives you the gift, you've got it. That's all that matters. We know that the gift of eternal life was promised, we know how it was achieved—by Jesus giving his life for us. We know how it becomes ours. We know that it is on deposit waiting for the time of our death or Jesus' return, whichever comes first. It's all right here in the Bible. Jesus doesn't need to say any more. It's already been said. It's here for us to see and it's still true. It's a wise move to trust that man who doesn't say that much.

Finally, it's true that Jesus doesn't seek out and crush his opposition here on earth. Yes, the wicked sometimes prosper at the expense of the righteous. Yes, immoral behavior is tolerated and accepted more and more. No, the lightning bolts aren't reigning down on Southern California. Why not? Same reason Jesus sometimes ate with prostitutes and tax collectors – the outcasts – while he was here. Same reason he went to Zaccheus' house to eat. Same reason he called Matthew to be his disciple. Same reason he sent Paul to Corinth and Rome, the immorality hubs of the day. No, it's not that he tolerated their sins or accepted them. He desired that they would be won over and changed. Now you tell me, is that weakness, or strength? It's still a wise move to trust this man who doesn't seem to do anything.

And I hope we aren't afraid to show the same kind of weakness as we try to win others over. Jesus chose to be weak to surrender his dignity, even his life to make us strong. I hope we aren't afraid to have a rough ride, accepting struggle and pain if it means we stay on the path to heaven. I hope we aren't afraid to say a few things that are true and helpful instead of saying many things just to impress others and be liked. I hope we aren't afraid to do the things that others see as a waste of time – helping those who've made bad choices, talking with those who've been cast out by others in order to show them their savior. I hope you and I genuinely realize that it's still a wise move to trust this seemingly weak man, and I hope you and I are strong enough to be seen by others as weak! AMEN.