

## “Hosanna!”

Isaiah 50:4-9a • Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 • Philippians 2:5-11 • Matthew 21:1-11

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Palm Sunday

And so Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, amidst a throng of jubilant followers: “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” So they shouted, and so we still sing today: “All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!” “Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang; through pillared court and temple the joyful anthem rang.” “‘Hosanna in the highest!’ That ancient song we sing, for Christ is our Redeemer; the Lord of heaven, our King.” But – what does “hosanna” *mean*?

One of the things that has become more and more apparent to me in recent years is that we use a lot of jargon in the church that is not really used anywhere else. We throw around words like “grace” and “salvation,” terms like “Pharisees” and “Sadducees,” people groups like “Samaritans” and “Philistines,” concepts like “the temple” and “the Jewish law,” exclamations like “alleluia” and “amen,” and those of us who have spent most of our lives in the church often don’t realize that *these words don’t usually show up in our normal everyday vocabulary*. These aren’t words we hear a lot *outside* the church. People who haven’t grown up in the church – adults or teenagers who start coming because a friend invited them or because the Holy Spirit prompted them – start out not really knowing what *any* of these words mean. Someone has to *explain* them to them. The word “hosanna” falls into that same category. That’s a word we mostly hear on just *one day* out of the entire church year – today, Palm Sunday! – and we hear it a *lot* on that one day. So far this morning you’ve heard, said, or sung the word “hosanna” more than 20 times! But if someone asked you what it *means*, what would you say?

I’m going to try to help you with that this morning. It’s pretty simple, actually. Except ... it’s not. There’s a little surprise coming. There is more to this word than meets the eye!

Let’s start with some basic facts. The word “hosanna” shows up in the New Testament exactly six times. It *only* shows up in the Gospels – never in the letters, nor in the book of Acts or the book of Revelation. And in the Gospels, it *almost always* shows up in this one story – Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem – and in that story, *only* on the lips of the crowds that were praising Jesus. In Matthew, the crowds say: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” That’s two. In Mark, they say: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” That’s two more. And in John, they say, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” That’s one more, a total of five so far. The word doesn’t show up in Luke’s gospel at all – in the Palm Sunday story in that Gospel, the crowds simply say:

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” There’s no “hosanna” to be found there! And there’s one final mention, back in Matthew’s Gospel, very shortly after Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem, on the same day. He drives out the people buying and selling things in the temple, he overturns the tables of the money-changers, then he starts curing the blind and the lame. The children in the temple who see him doing these things cry out, saying: “Hosanna to the Son of David!” That’s the sixth and final reference in the New Testament.

So, to sum that up, here is a list of the specific sentences where the word “hosanna” occurs:

1. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:9)
2. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9)
3. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matthew 21:15)
4. “Hosanna!” (Mark 11:9)
5. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:10)
6. “Hosanna!” (John 12:13)

... which boils down to just three sentences, each of which is said twice:

1. “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (x2)
2. “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (x2)
3. “Hosanna!” (x2)

That’s it. The sum total of *all* the instances of the word “hosanna” in the New Testament. All of them are spoken by crowds or children, all of them in praise of Jesus, all of them on Palm Sunday.

But what about the Old Testament? Does the word “hosanna” appear in the Old Testament?

I’m so glad you asked. If you do a search for the word in any of the standard search engines, like Bible Gateway or Bible.com, or in most Bible concordances, you will probably come up with nothing. Bible Gateway includes over 55 translations, and the word “hosanna” does not appear to show up in the Old Testament in *any* of them. Except ... sometimes ... appearances are deceiving.

Take a look again at this verse that we heard earlier (Psalm 118:25): “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!” Do you see the word “hosanna” in there anywhere? No? What if I told you that the first words, “save us,” are in Hebrew *hoshia-na*? *Hoshia-na*, “hosanna,” *hoshia-na*, “hosanna” – do you hear the similarity? There is a direct relationship here. Our word “hosanna” comes from the Greek word “hosanna” that shows up those six times in the New Testament. That Greek word “hosanna” comes from an Aramaic word, *hoshana*. That Aramaic word *hoshana* comes from the Hebrew phrase *hoshia-na* that we see in Psalm 118:25, which literally means “save us,” or even more literally, “save *now*.” It’s a prayer. It’s a prayer asking God for help. Really, it’s a *plea*. “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!” If you look at that whole Psalm, it includes sentences like these: “Out of my distress I called on the Lord,” and “All nations surrounded me, ... they surrounded me, surrounded me on every side, ... they surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns,” and “I was pushed hard, so that I was falling.” This was a prayer of someone who was utterly *desperate*. Or, perhaps, a prayer of a *group* of people who were utterly desperate. “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!” To put it another way: “Hosanna!” “Save us – *now!*”

So the word “Hosanna” originally, and literally, was a prayer asking God for help, in urgency and desperation. It’s a prayer you can utter anytime *you* are facing an urgent or desperate situation. Someone you love is suffering: “Hosanna” – save us, *now!* You’ve just received a frightening diagnosis:

“Hosanna” – save us, *now!* You’re hearing the latest news, or worried about the state of the world:  
“Hosanna” – save us, *now!* O dear God, *please*, come to our aid, *now!* *Hosanna!*

So that is one meaning of the word “hosanna.” A very *important*, even *primal*, meaning of the word “hosanna.” *Save us – now!* But at some point in time, the word also took on a *second* meaning.

Look again at those places where the word occurs in the New Testament, in the cheers of the crowds and on the lips of the children: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!” “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Do *all* of those instances of the word “hosanna” sound like prayers asking God for help, in urgency and desperation? No. No, they don’t. *Some* of them might. *Some* of those people might have been crying out to Jesus for help. But most of them – most of them sound like they’re offering words of *praise*. Not words of *desperation*, but rather words of *excitement* and even *joy*. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” It’s almost like *hallelujah* – “Praise God!” *Jesus is here! Jesus has come to Jerusalem!* Hallelujah! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

One of the things we know about words is that they can change in meaning over time. The word “awful” originally meant “worthy of awe,” in the sense of *great reverence*. The word “nice” once meant “stupid,” “ignorant,” or “foolish.” The word “spinster” used to simply refer to “a woman who spins yarn.” Go back and read any piece of English literature from a few hundred years ago, and you’re bound to stumble over some words that don’t mean *now* what they meant *then*. The same thing seems to have happened to the word “hosanna,” sometime in the several-hundred-year gap between the Old Testament and the New. A word that was once an urgent and desperate prayer to God for help came to take on a new and different meaning: a joyful shout of praise or adoration. “Hosanna!” “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!” There is *excitement* in the air! *Praise* to God!

In modern Hebrew, the word *hoshanah* still retains its original meaning: *save us, now*. The word is still used in Jewish liturgy to this very day, especially during the fall festival of Sukkot, also called Booths or Tabernacles. Jews lift up prayers to God, using the word *hoshanah*: “save us, now!”

So the word “hosanna” means *two different things*. In the Old Testament, and in modern Judaism, it is a prayer asking for help from almighty God. In the New Testament, and in modern Christianity, it is primarily a joyful shout of praise or adoration: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

And you can use it *both ways*. When you need God’s help, when your personal troubles or the sufferings of your loved ones or cares of the world are getting you down, use the original meaning: “Hosanna – save us, now!” Or when you are jubilant and excited about all the great things God is doing, or has already done, use the second meaning: “Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

You could even do both at the same time. Perhaps that’s what some of those people were doing when they were joyfully greeting Jesus as he triumphantly entered Jerusalem. “Hosanna!” We are *thrilled* that you are here, Jesus! Thank you for all the incredible things you have already done! And *save us*, we beg you, *save us* from all that is not right in the world! Only *you* can save us!

Hosanna! Say it with me together: *Hosanna!* Hosanna in the highest heaven!!! Amen!!!

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