

ONLY KNOWN...WHAT WOULD

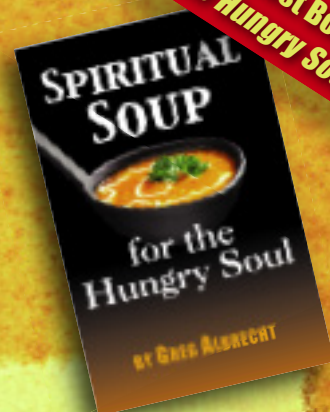
IF YOU HAD



BRING YOU

BY GREG ALBRECHT

"Soup Sample"
Excerpt from Greg's Newest Book
Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul



After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'"

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They replied, "The Lord needs it."

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.—Luke 19:28-44

April is usually the month when we celebrate the twin Sundays—Palm Sunday and Easter. Our passage describes the background of what has come to be known as Palm Sunday. This day, and events of the week that follow, serve to remind us of Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem, of the events of the last few days of his earthly life.

This week, often called Passion Week, is a study in contrasts. It begins with Jesus' "Triumphal Entry"—when he is welcomed by the crowds somewhat like a conquering military leader—and ends with Good Friday—the day of his crucifixion.

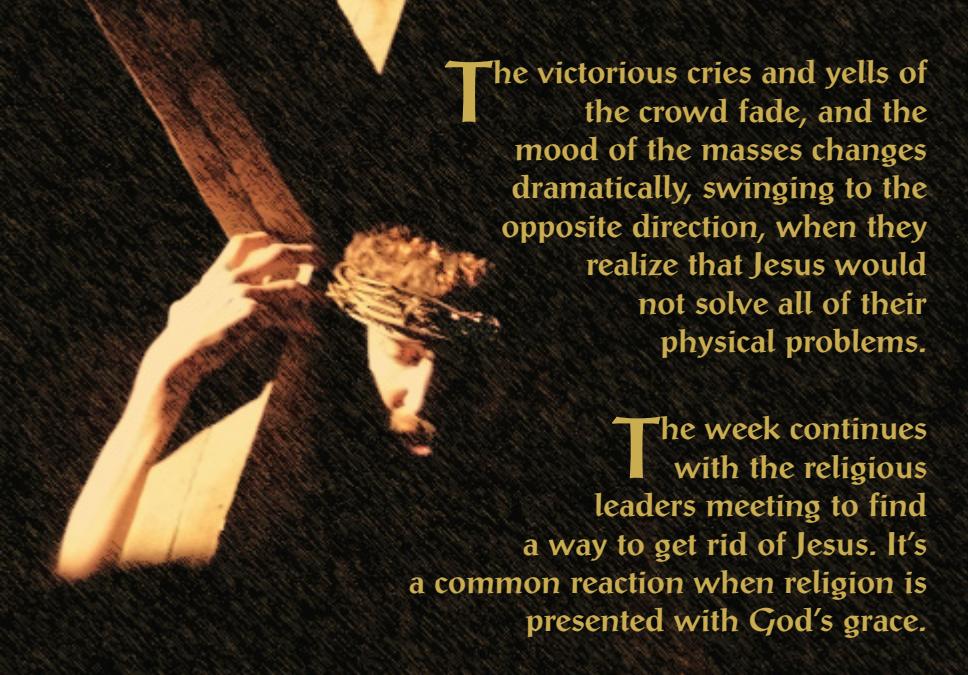
Hailed on Sunday as a king—crucified on Friday, along

with two common criminals. This day, and this week, is a time of contrast, a time of irony and of drama.

Palm Sunday (some call it Passion Sunday) begins with palm branches being laid before Jesus as he is acclaimed by the crowds, and thus triumphantly enters Jerusalem. The air was filled with shouts of "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

We enjoy this joyful scene, savoring the pageantry of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We'd like to replay this victory scene over and over again, like fans of a team that wins a game, match or contest never tire of remembering the championship that was won.

We naturally prefer not to focus on the negative



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events of the week between Palm Sunday and Easter. It's tempting to skip over the grim events between the two Sundays.

Humanly, we would rather avoid the darkness of the week in between. But Passion Week goes dark soon after Palm Sunday. The victorious cries and yells of the crowd fade, and the mood of the masses changes dramatically, swinging to the opposite direction, when they realize that Jesus would not solve all of their physical problems. They had cheered a person they saw as a new national leader, one who would help them get rid of the hated Romans and their military occupation.

The week continues with the religious leaders meeting to find a way to get rid of Jesus. It's a common reaction when religion is presented with God's grace.

We read in our passage of Jesus weeping over the city—to the crowds who had welcomed him with the cry, *Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*... Jesus responded **...If You...Had Only Known...What Would Bring You Peace.**

Jesus wept over the fact that they had rejected relationship with him, the Prince of peace, and instead chose religion. As a result of choosing religion, the people of Jerusalem would experience a horrible war of attrition.

In the war of 69-70 A.D. the Romans so completely destroyed Jerusalem and the temple that one stone was not left on another. That bloody war happened, as our passage records Jesus saying, *because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.*

This war was not Jesus' punishment on the Jews because they had rejected him. The war was necessary because, in God's plan, the temple in Jerusalem had to be destroyed—it was a remaining obstacle to the new covenant. It was a religious building in which people placed their faith. Their relationship was with a religion and a religious building rather than on the personal intimacy offered by God under the new covenant.

After Jesus wept over the events that would befall Jerusalem in less than 40 years, then, during this week of darkness, with its two bookends of Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, came Jesus' betrayal at the hands of Judas. All his disciples abandoned him in his time of trouble.

Pilate appeared before an angry mob, with two prisoners, Barrabas and Jesus. Pilate presented the crowd with a choice—they could choose which one of these two men would be released, and which one would be condemned to die.

The crowd made its decision—a man who deserved, by human law, to be executed, was set free—and Jesus, who was perfectly innocent, was crucified.

The cries of the crowds changed from *"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"* to *"Crucify him!"*

Base human emotions continued to be unleashed as Jesus was beaten, tortured and then crucified. Today, Jesus still proclaims that same message—from verses 42 and 44:

If You...Had Only Known... What Would Bring You Peace... and *You did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.*

The crowds who greeted Jesus making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem—triumphal in terms of their welcome, in terms of the accolades they heaped on him and the acclaim they gave him—projected their hopes on to Jesus, seeing him as a military savior.

The crowds wanted to see blood—the blood of their oppressors. Jesus gave them blood, but it was his own blood, not the blood of those from whom they wanted revenge.

It's the same today—take North Americans as an example. North Americans want to remain number one. We want to always be the best. We want to continue being the most powerful and financially blessed nation on earth. We want our highly prized standard of living to continue. We sing out "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord" to leaders, politicians, and military commanders and generals who promise to guarantee to continue our way of life.

Some church pulpits urge congregants to vote for a particular person, seemingly convinced that person will deliver America. Yes, I know, the pulpits will also add the disclaimer, "of course God will deliver us—but we think this person is the person who will best follow God."

The fact is, at the end of the day, people often transfer their allegiance and their faith from God—from Jesus—to politicians, to nationalism, to militarism. Sometimes this transfer of allegiance happens in a building dedicated to God, urged on by emotional appeals from the pulpit.

Over dinner, one of our friends, who was not born in America, rhetorically asked my wife and me, “You know the problem with you Americans?” Our friend is now a naturalized citizen, so her comments about “you Americans” were more about native born Americans like my wife and me. Our friend continued, “The trouble with you Americans is that you are too arrogant.”

Since I am one of those native-born Americans, let me quickly justify myself (self-justification is so important, isn't it! It's the only exercise some of us ever get!). To be fair, such arrogance invariably goes with the territory of being number one. History teaches us that any time a nation or empire has been number one then that nation or empire begins to think that they are better—more capable, more worthy—than other people.

But, back to arrogant Americans for a moment. Let's see if this shoe fits!

It is true that the United States seeks military victory. It is true that the United States, as every other nation in the history of the world has, trusts in its weapons, military, technological advantages and superiority.

Jesus said, **If You...Had Only Known...What Would Bring You Peace.**

Do you and I know where to find peace? Where is our trust? Where is our hope for the future? Is our security in Washington, D.C., in politicians, in the Pentagon or in the military?

If so, sooner or later, as all humans who have ever been in such a place of being “number one” have learned, we will learn that we didn't really know what would bring us peace—we did not recognize the time of God's coming.

The fact is that God never intended our lives in Christ, our lives in relationship with God, to be one powerful, victorious, triumphant celebration after another.

As Christ-followers we don't go from the jubilant celebration of Palm Sunday, skipping over the events of the week and Good Friday, so that we can once

again experience another peak moment, the victorious rejoicing of Easter Sunday.

Real life in Christ is life lived in the trenches. It's life lived in the valley of the shadow of death, a valley we don't walk through alone, for he is with us. But, we will all still walk through the valley. It's part of picking up our cross and following Christ. It's part of being a Christ-follower.

Authentic Christians journey through the week. The journey through the week, with its peaks and valleys, is part of God's game plan. The week of our lives in Christ, just like his own Passion Week, is filled with adversity. It is in adversity that we come to know and

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It's easy to join in a celebration. It's easy to rejoice when your team appears to have won. It's easy to see God “at work” (to use a phrase we often use when things are turning out well for us). When the status quo is not threatened—when our lifestyle, our health, our well-being is not threatened—we often say “God is at work.”

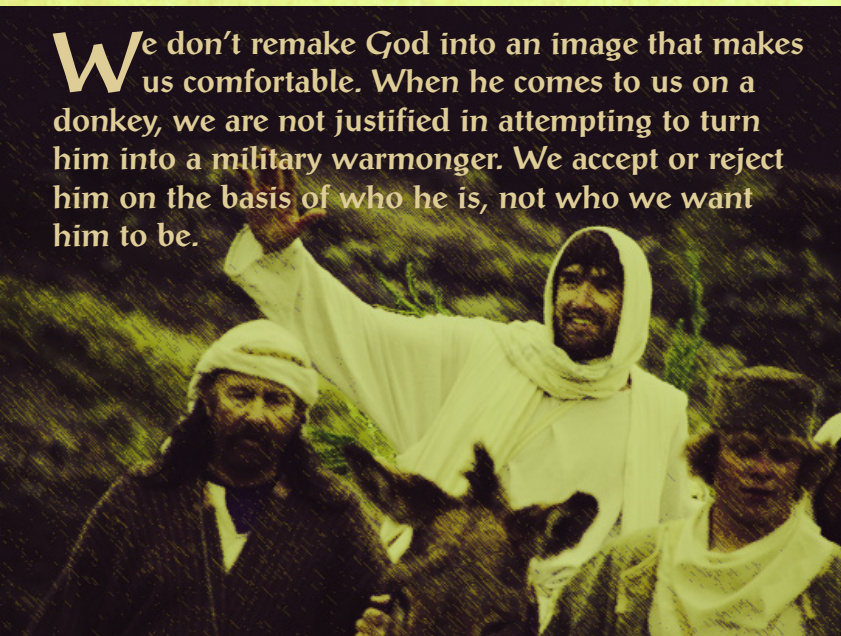
Jesus wept because the crowds that cheered him were not actually cheering him—they were cheering who and what they wanted him to be. They had transferred their ideas of who they wanted Jesus to be. The crowds were actually cheering for their own desires. That same dynamic can happen in our lives, as well. We can cheer God when we think he is who and what we want him to be. We can thank God for being involved in our lives when it seems that he is under our control, doing what we want him to do.

The biblical background played out by the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem is supplied in Psalm 118. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey the crowds *cut branches from trees and spread them on the road* (Matthew 21:8) and shouted *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!* (Luke 19:38). Their words and actions were echoing the words of Psalm 118:26-27:

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.

Psalm 118 continues, concluding with verses 28-29:

We don't remake God into an image that makes us comfortable. When he comes to us on a donkey, we are not justified in attempting to turn him into a military warmonger. We accept or reject him on the basis of who he is, not who we want him to be.



The week of our lives in Christ, just like his own Passion Week, is filled with adversity. It is in adversity that we come to know and recognize God. In times of stress we will either draw closer to God or we will run from God.

You are my God, and I will give you thanks, you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Psalm 118, the chapter the crowds had in mind on the first Palm Sunday, concludes just as it started (let's take a look at verses 1-4) and how the phrase "his love endures forever" is repeated.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Let Israel say:

"His love endures forever."

Let the house of Aaron say:

"His love endures forever."

Let those who fear the LORD say:

"His love endures forever."

The psalm is talking about a covenant love God has with his people, his commitment to those

tempting to turn him into a military warmonger. We accept or reject him on the basis of who he is, not who we want him to be.

Verses 26 and 27 of Psalm 118 may have been the inspiration for the crowd's greeting of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday—throwing palm fronds in front of him and shouting, *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!* But the rest of the psalm provides the Answer that they needed.

They needed relationship with God, just as we all do. They needed Jesus, but they were so blinded by what they wanted him to be, they did not know what would bring them peace. They needed to read all of Psalm 118, not just the texts they chose that fit their desires for military conquest at that time.

site—it was victory over death and the grave.

It is in picking up our own cross and following Jesus that we fully become Christ-followers. The standards and criteria of success for our world, and even that of the religious institutionalism of Christendom, are not the basis of our relationship in God.

We may be in poor health. We may suffer. We may be experiencing traumatic family problems. We may find ourselves out of work and/or in financial debt. Even though physical, external evidence of our lives might cause us and others to conclude that we are spiritual losers, without any "success" or "victory," God's values are often the polar opposite of humans.

Remember that God's love endures forever, even during the trying and difficult events of our

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who accept his invitation to be in relationship with him.

It's somewhat like the love spoken of in the marital vows, when two people make a commitment to their relationship: "for richer, for poorer, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health."

God's love endures forever.

This is the basis of what Jesus meant when he lamented that the crowds in Jerusalem did not know what would bring them peace—and that they had not recognized the time of God's coming.

God's love is continuously offered to us. We have a choice, whether to accept or reject it. For his part, God's love endures forever. He will not give up on us. But he will not force his love on us either. We are invited into relationship with him on his terms, not on our own. We don't remake God into an image that makes us comfortable. When he comes to us on a donkey, we are not justified in at-

tempting to turn him into a military warmonger. We accept or reject him on the basis of who he is, not who we want him to be.

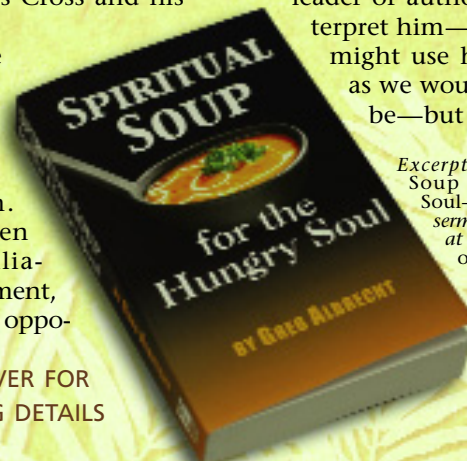
They needed to come to know Jesus, and by God's grace experience God's love as the foundation of their relationship with him. The crowds at that first Palm Sunday needed to know, just as we need to know, that it was the suffering of Jesus, culminating in Good Friday, that would gain the victory over death and the grave. The peace that the Prince of peace brought was the relationship we can have with God, a relationship that is not based on our physical success and victories, but rather on Jesus' victory on his Cross and his empty tomb.

Ironically, the very reason for which the crowds rejected Jesus provides the foundation for salvation. The Cross, seen then as complete humiliation and embarrassment, was in fact the very oppo-

sites. God's love was just as present, and just as evident, for those given spiritual vision by God's grace during the painful events of Passion Week as it was on Palm Sunday and on Easter Sunday.

Let us embrace our God. Let us come to know Jesus as we never have before. Let us come to know that Jesus, and Jesus alone, brings lasting, eternal peace.

Let us recognize that our God, in the person of Jesus, is coming to us. Let us accept him and choose him as he is—not as some religious leader or authority might interpret him—not as religion might use his name—not as we would like Jesus to be—but as he is. □



Excerpted from Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul—a collection of 48 sermons originally given at Christianity Without the Religion (CWR).