

Palm Sunday

April 14, 2019

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Last week I asserted that Jesus came to fix the core human problem of sin, which is why he was so absolutely focused on Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Jesus would lay down his life for our sins on the cross. But we also talked about the fact that not everyone seemed to think that sin was the core human problem. Of course, the first example of that was Peter, who rebuked Jesus for his Debbie downer talk of crucifixions and death. And then Jesus turned and rebuked Peter for his all-too-human way of thinking. Once again this morning we will again see clearly the divide between the train of Jesus' thought and the hopes of the people he came to save. So this morning I want to look at John's description of Palm Sunday where Jesus comes into Jerusalem.

John 12:12-19

¹²The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!" ¹⁴Jesus 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." ¹⁶At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. ¹⁷Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

The Crowd's Perspective

Psalm 118:25-26

Verse twelve calls Passover, "the feast." It was one of the largest of the seven feasts, which meant that Jews came from all over the known world of the time to celebrate God's mercy in sparing his people from death in Egypt when they placed the blood of a lamb over the doorpost of their house. Of course, Passover was also a reminder of God's judgment against their enemies, who lost the firstborn of each of their households. Not only was the crowd wound up because of Passover, but in John's Gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem to celebrate Passover the day after raising Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, which was only a couple of miles outside of Jerusalem. Of all of the miracles Jesus had performed, raising Lazarus from the dead was one of the most spectacular, and that charged atmosphere seems to have followed Jesus to Jerusalem and helps explain the way Jesus was greeted by the people.

So as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people were shouting Hosanna to Jesus, whom they called the King of Israel. In fact, they're quoting from Psalm 118:25-26, which says, "25O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. 26Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you." You might have noticed that they added the phrase describing Jesus as the King of Israel. It's also interesting to note—that very Psalm was used to celebrate the feast of tabernacles, which recounted God's deliverance of His people from Egypt. Every year, the Israelites would camp out in make-shift tents, called tabernacles, and would use palm branches for the tents or shelters they built. Those palm branches became a symbol of freedom from political oppression, originally Egyptian oppression, which helps make sense of the prayer, "save us." It doesn't take a scholar to see what the people think they need to be saved from and to understand why they were so wound up: they wanted Jesus to save them from Rome just as God had saved their ancestor from Egypt.

Zechariah 9:9-10

John 12:14-15 gives us another clue to the thinking of the people who greeted Jesus. Jesus found a donkey and sat on it and rode into Jerusalem, bringing to mind Zechariah 9:9-10, which says, "9Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses 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."

So Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people can't help themselves from making this association. If you read the passage in Zechariah carefully, God promises to remove the war horses and chariots and break the battle bows, and then the king would come and proclaim peace to the nations, whose rule would extend from sea to sea and even to the ends of the earth. And they thought all of that would happen in one fell swoop. John, who himself was a disciple, admits that they completely missed the point of the donkey and a king who would proclaim peace to the nations. They thought Jesus had come as a king to destroy the nations. It wasn't until Jesus had been raised and spent time teaching them that they finally understood. The crowd who had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead continued to spread the word about Jesus to the point that the Pharisees nearly despaired of Jesus' popularity, admitting, "the whole world has gone after him (John 12:19)."

Jesus' Perspective

Necessary Death

It's important to remember in all of this that Jesus knew exactly what needed to and was going to happen to him in Jerusalem, but again he was the

only one who knew it at the time. The disciples seemed unable to hear and understand what Jesus said to them in passages like Mark 8:31-32, "31Jesus then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32He spoke plainly about this..." Or Luke 9:22, where Jesus says, "...the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed..." Or passages like Luke 18:31-32, in which Jesus says, "31...we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. 32He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him."

Jesus explained it in another way in Matthew 20:28, which is also recorded in Mark 10:45. After learning that the mother of James and John asked for her sons to be honored above the other disciples, Mark records the anger of the other disciples and Jesus' response to all of them, "42... You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. 43But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. 45For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Unlike the crowd, Jesus could see that the core issue facing humanity was their bondage to sin and to Satan; their bondage to Rome was only a symptom of the much deeper issue. In His grace, God had provided a temporary solution to sin through the sacrificial system, but the blood of bulls and goats could never permanently take away the sins of humans. In fact, the author of Hebrews says those sacrifices were in one way "a yearly reminder of sin (Hebrews 10:3)," not a long-term solution. That's why the Book of Hebrews says that the law and all the sacrifices com-

manded therein was not the reality, or the solution, because even though they were “repeated endlessly year after year,” they could not “make perfect those who drew near to worship.” Jesus knew that unless and until a perfect sacrifice was made, humans would never be free even if they enjoyed national sovereignty.

So Jesus finished the work of redemption that God promised in the Garden of Eden, a work that could not be finished apart from the cross. That means whatever else God wants to do in our lives, whatever changes He wants to make, whatever healing He wants to perform, is all based on what Jesus did on the cross. Truly, there can be no permanent healing without the cross because sickness is the result of sin; when sin is permanently done away with, sickness will disappear. There can be no life without the cross because death is the result of sin; when sin is permanently destroyed, death will disappear as well. So what do we take away from this passage?

Conclusion # 1

The first conclusion I want to draw is this: like the crowds who welcomed Jesus we often want Jesus to fix the parts of our lives that are most painful, but we fail to see sin as the problem or Jesus’ death as the solution. To borrow a metaphor, we want Jesus to fix our fruit but leave our tree alone. We want prosperity, freedom, autonomy, and we’re excited to think Jesus might offer those things to us. But he came to fix the cause of the problem, which is our rebellion against God. Unless and until that’s dealt with, nothing else will ever be right. As we move into this holy week, I want to encourage you to reflect on the death of Jesus for you and for your sin and remember that his death is the basis of everything else God has done or will ever do for you. Jesus’ death is the source of your forgiveness, healing, provision, and help.

Conclusion # 2

That leads to a second, but related, conclusion. As Christians, we should be careful about seeing anything or anyone as the solution to the fundamental problem of sin, particularly political systems or leaders, which is one of the oldest idolatries on the list. In the days of Samuel, you might remember that the people of Israel wanted a king because the other countries had a king and they thought that having a king would solve their problems, which in reality had been caused by their rebellion against God and his word. So also the people of Jesus’ day, who wanted Jesus to free them from Roman rule and return to a Davidic monarchy.

Christians still fall into this trap. We think that if we can get the right or wrong person or party in or out that our problems will be solved. We think if we can add this law or take that one away, that the problems of humanity can be alleviated. I’m not saying that leaders and laws don’t matter, but they are a long way from being our core problem. The problem is that as sinners, we elect our brand of sinner, who sins in ways that we’re okay with because it promotes the kind of life we want to lead. Sin is our problem and Jesus is its solution and if Christians don’t understand that, then what hope is there?

The third conclusion I want to draw is this: sometimes as God’s people we struggle to embrace the reality that Jesus finished the work of redemption on the cross. He didn’t do part of it. He didn’t do most of it. He finished the work of redemption with his death. His sacrifice would not be like the sacrifice of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, which only covered sin for a time. When that happens, we can end up living a spiritually insecure life. Every time we sin, we feel like the work has been unfinished. We feel like we’re never good enough and therefore never really right with God because we assume that our salvation has to depend on us and we can plainly see that we’re not good enough. Jesus entered Jerusalem as the people shouted, “save us.” And while they would not understand it, that’s exactly what Jesus did as

he entered that city and prepared himself to die on the cross.

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