

Marvel: What Did Jesus Do?

Triumphal Entry

John 12:12-26

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“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.” Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” (John 12:12–26, ESV)

One of the challenges of making your way through life is the uncertainty that we face every day. Decisions have consequences – both positively and negatively. When you start to make multiple decisions a path begins to form. More often than not, you don’t fully understand how things are going to work out or what it all means.

For the Christian, we know that the Bible promises that God is working out his will in the world and in our lives. We know that there’s a divine plan. But usually we don’t know what that plan is. More often than not you have to walk by faith, trusting that the Lord will give you wisdom and grace for each step along the way.

One of the advantages of being a bit older is that you have a greater ability to look back on your life and see what God was doing. Time and history provide clarity. You may have heard it said that hindsight is always 20/20. As you look back, there are important lessons to be learned that could serve to guide you even now.

Do you know that this is true for your spiritual life? We are over 2,000 years removed from the account in John 12. We have the advantage of knowing the entire story of the death, burial, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ. At the time Jesus was living, many people – even his disciples – didn't understand what he was trying to accomplish.

For most of Jesus' ministry, he was misunderstood. The Gospel of John shows us over and over how human beings were blind to who he was and what he came to do. John records these events because he wants you to see Jesus clearly so that you'll know Jesus personally and live like him.

We see two things very clearly in our text today: we see the contrast between a misunderstood king and a suffering Savior. This challenge becomes clear in an event often called the "Triumphal Entry." Let's explore this together.

Misunderstood King

In our previous study of this gospel, we learned about the raising of Lazarus from the dead, the beginning of a plot to kill Jesus, and the sacrificial gift of Mary as she anoints Jesus' feet. John is leading us into the last week of Jesus' life. Some of the most consequential moments and teaching are recorded in John 12-20.

In verse 12 the scene shifts from the banquet in Bethany to the capital city of Jerusalem. The feast of Passover is about to begin and pilgrims from all over the country are making their way to the holy city. Historians estimate that hundreds of thousands of people would have flooded the city for this religious festival.

Passover was one of the most important celebrations for the Jewish people. If you'd like to learn more, you need to read Exodus 4-14. It commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery through the 10 plagues, including the slaughter of every first-born not covered by the blood on the doorposts. Passover involved a sacrificial lamb, deliverance through blood, and the claim of God upon his people – "Let my people go!"

Moses performed signs, spoke for God, and led the people through the Red Sea. And he prophesied that another prophet would come (Deut. 18:15-18). The Jewish people are anticipating that God is going to repeat what he did through the Exodus. They anticipate another Moses. They long for another deliverance. Passover celebrates the past as it looks to the future, especially when you consider the brutal and repressive occupation by Rome.

News begins to travel among the crowd that Jesus was coming to the celebration. No doubt word about his raising of Lazarus had spread. People are starting to wonder if he'll be another leader who will help Israel find its true identity again.

The large crowd (v. 13) grabs palm branches and they create a procession. They meet Jesus as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. The palm branches are significant. About 200 years earlier, the palm branch became a national symbol. When an Israelite leader named Simon Maccabee drove out Syrian forces from Jerusalem (around 140 BC), he was honored with singing and palm branches. When Israel

created their own currency during a season of insurrection, they inscribed palm branches on the coins.¹ You might think of this symbol in our context to be the same as an eagle or the chant “USA.” Palm branches pointed toward a nationalistic hope embedded in the coming Messiah.

We see this reinforced what the crowd chants. They shout “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.” The term “Hosanna” means “give salvation now.” It’s a cry for deliverance. It is a quotation of Psalm 118, which was a part of a series of songs sung during the Feast of Tabernacles. And it was tradition that when this text was sung, people would raise a palm branch in the air. Think of it as putting your hand on your heart when the national anthem is played.

You could also think of this as a military salute when “Hail to the Chief” is played when the President enters a room. Imagine a member of congress walking down Pennsylvania Avenue with people waving flags and saluting him or her as people played “Hail to the Chief.” That’s what is happening here.

This crowd, by their actions, is signaling that their national deliverer has arrived. They add the words, “even the King of Israel” to what the Psalm says. The people are looking for a national leader. That’s what they are expecting. Frankly, that is what they wanted. They believed that the greatest need in the life of the nation was a political / military leader to liberate them from Rome.

Now John attempts to reshape what his readers would see here. In verse 14, John mentions that Jesus finds a young donkey and rides on it. Jesus is not riding a war horse. He rides a donkey, and then he quotes Zechariah 9:9. Notice, this is not what the crowds say. This is John’s commentary.

Zechariah 9 is a passage that highlights the coming king as a man of righteousness, salvation, and humility (9:9). He is a king who brings peace (v. 10), and his reign will extend to the whole world (v 10). And in this passage God promises that “because of blood of my covenant...I will set your prisoners free” (v. 11). So, you can see why John quotes this passage. He wants to reframe what you see in this moment.

Why does he put this in here? People did not understand who was riding on the donkey or why Jesus had come. Verse 16 tells us that even his disciples didn’t “get it.” According to John, it wasn’t until after Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection that the disciples fully understood this moment.

John wants you to see an important irony here. The crowd at Lazarus’ tomb continues to bear witness about him as he enters the city of Jerusalem (v. 17). The people are celebrating Jesus’ ability to perform these signs (v. 18). And the Pharisees, as they see what is happening, reach for the panic button: “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him” (v. 19).

The religious leaders were threatened by him. The crowds expected a political king. The Lazarus crowd is enamored with his power. The disciples couldn’t figure him out.

¹ D. A. Carson, [*The Gospel according to John*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 432.

Why did all these people miss Jesus? There are a number of reasons, but I think you could summarize it by saying that they didn't understand or appreciate their real need. And before we are too judgmental, we should really appreciate that incorrectly evaluating what we really need is part of the problem with humanity.

The religious leaders believe that they just need Jesus to stop making waves. He's creating division and controversy. They don't want to lose any of their power. The crowds believe that their greatest need is to have freedom from Rome. They think the biggest issue in life is a political one. They need Jesus to fix the country. Some of the disciples see Jesus not only as a great teacher, but also their ticket to greatness. This was the week when the disciples argue about who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24-30). And at an earlier time, the mother of John and James asked for prominent positions for her sons (Matt. 20:20-28).

The story of humanity is our perpetual misunderstanding of what is really important and how we even try to use Jesus or Christianity to get that "thing." We don't want to go to hell, so we pray a prayer. We want to have our needs met, so we join a church. We want our spouse to change, so we get a Christian counselor. We want our roommate to be easier to live with, so we invite them to church. We want to find a spouse, so we join a particular small group. We want our kids to not "go off the rails," so we get them in youth group. We want our career or business to be "blessed," so we pray before meetings. We want our political people in office, so we find spiritual justifications for our positions or our parties.

Don't get me wrong: your eternity, attending church, a good marriage, godly kids, having a good roommate, finding a spouse, having a career, growing your business, and political positions are important. They are not bad – at all. Unless you believe or live as if that's the only thing you live for and you try to use Jesus to get what you want.

What's crazy about John is something we need to lament: nearly everyone misunderstood Jesus. Why? Because of their lust for something else besides him. He is a misunderstood king.

Suffering Savior

Thankfully, John doesn't leave us there. He highlights the true nature of Jesus' ministry with a story about a group of Greeks that seek him along with a series of very important verses.

In verses 20-22 we learn that among the Jews were a group of Greeks. These were non-Jewish people (as opposed to Greek-speaking Jews) who attended the Passover feast. And this group comes to Philip with a request to see Jesus. We are not entirely sure why they come to Philip. It may be that they approach him because he has a Greek name or because of where he's from.

But it is very interesting that at the very time that Jewish leaders are turning against him, Jesus is being sought by "outsiders." John is surely attempting to say something more here about Jesus' global mission.

Regardless, Jesus makes a series of profoundly important statements. There are three.

First, he identifies that the hour has come for “the Son of Man to be glorified” (v. 23). This is John’s way of telegraphing that what follows in this gospel is the story of Jesus’ triumph. His mission is about to be fulfilled. You can imagine how that must have landed on the disciples. “This is it!”

Second, Jesus provides a summary of his ministry that must have been shocking to those who heard it. Consider the weight and counter-cultural nature of these words:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24, ESV)

Jesus uses a farming illustration that would have been familiar. In order for plants to appear, dead seeds must be planted. And in so doing, Jesus foreshadows his mission. He, like the grain of wheat, must die so that his mission will bear much fruit.

In the context of the triumphal entry, this must have sounded so strange. It is odd. This was not how the culture in Jesus’ day operated. Might made right. To the victor goes the spoils. Jesus will upend all of that. He comes into Jerusalem, not as a king who will conquer politically or militarily, but as the Savior who can save people from their sins. The way to victory is through a humiliating death.

Part of the reason why this path seems so odd is because of our inability to discern what is wrong and how to make it right. Part of what Jesus does is confounding the wise, humiliating the proud, and healing the broken. The way of Jesus is profoundly counter-cultural at its core.

Third, Jesus doesn’t merely apply this to his life. He speaks directly to those who follow him:

“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” (John 12:25–26, ESV)

Do you see why this is important? Being a disciple of Jesus means embracing the same mission that he had. The call for the kernel of wheat to “die” doesn’t simply apply to him, it extends to all those who call themselves Christians.

If you are not yet a Christian, this means that the first step in coming to Jesus is coming to terms with your need to see your sin for what it really is. It means that the only way you are going to find hope in Jesus is realizing that the path to victory and forgiveness means putting the old “you” to death. It means giving up your claim of self-made righteousness. It requires you to come face-to-face with your need for a Savior.

And for those of you who are Christians, this means that our lives need the upside-down logic of following Jesus.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ‘Blessed

are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5:3–10, ESV)

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34–35, ESV)

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus," (Philippians 2:3–5, ESV)

"Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" (1 Peter 5:5, ESV)

Jesus is a suffering savior. And following him is counter-cultural to the core.

The religious rulers were threatened by him. The crowds tried to use him. The disciples misunderstood him. And with two thousand years behind us, we can see how they missed Jesus.

But lest we are too hard on them and too confident in ourselves we should also ask: Do I really understand Jesus? Do I want Jesus in my life? Do I really live like Jesus?

The way of Jesus sounds like this:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24, ESV)

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