

See Jesus

Palm Sunday | John 12:9–19

BibleWay Sermon Alignment

Holy Week begins with a crowd that is excited about Jesus. They line the streets, wave palm branches, shout “Hosanna,” and call him King of Israel. From the outside, this looks like the moment Jesus has been waiting for. From the inside, it is the moment John quietly tells us his audience is missing him entirely. Within a few verses, John writes that Jesus “departed and hid himself from them” (John 12:36). That is a strange thing to do at a parade thrown in your honor. Unless the parade was for the wrong person. This week, we begin asking the question that will carry us through Good Friday and Easter: when you look at Jesus, what are you actually seeing?

1. They Believed and They Didn’t

“On account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus... Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him.” — John 12:11, 37

There is a strange tension running through John 12. In verse 11, John tells us that because of the resurrection of Lazarus, many were believing in Jesus. Twenty-six verses later, John tells us that despite all the signs Jesus had done, they did not believe in him. Which is it? Did they believe or didn’t they?

The answer is both, and that is exactly the problem. They believed in something about Jesus. They believed he was powerful. They believed he could heal and raise the dead. They believed he was useful. But they did not believe in *him*. Throughout John’s gospel, signs are supposed to function like road markers—pointing to who Jesus actually is. The crowd loved the markers and missed the destination. They saw the power and never saw the person.

This is what spiritual blindness actually looks like. It is not usually total darkness. It is more like bad eyesight—your brain fills in the gaps with what it expects to see, and you are confident you are reading the road correctly even when you are heading for a cliff. The crowd was confident they had Jesus figured out. So were many of his disciples. And John, looking back years later as he writes, knows the difference. He wants us to feel the gap between believing in Jesus and actually seeing him.

Discussion Questions

1. Read John 12:11 and John 12:37 back to back. In the same chapter, John says people believed because of the signs and people did not believe despite the signs. As a group, share with each other: what was something you used to believe about Jesus that turned out to be more about an idea of him than about him himself? Looking back, what helped you start to see the difference?

2. John's gospel is full of people who saw Jesus's miracles up close and still missed who he was—the crowd at the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:26), Nicodemus coming by night (John 3:1–2), even Thomas needing to touch the wounds (John 20:25). What do you think makes it possible to be physically near Jesus, or biblically literate about Jesus, and still not really see him? What helps a person move from knowing about him to actually knowing him?

2. The Benefits Package

“When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus.” — John 12:9

Watch what John does in this single verse. He gives us two motivations side by side. They came because of Jesus—good. And they came to see Lazarus. Lazarus is what Jesus had done for somebody. Lazarus is the proof of the power. Lazarus is the benefit. And that second motivation is the one that quietly takes over the whole crowd.

Most of us navigate life by analyzing the benefits of any given thing. Should I take this job? What is the package? Should I commit to this relationship? What do I get? Should I sign up for this trip? What is included? That is normal. It is how human beings make decisions. The problem is that we often bring that same posture to Jesus. We ask, “What does Jesus do for me?” and we sign up for the parts we like and quietly opt out of the parts we don't. He forgives my sins—love that. He performs miracles—love that. He asks me to forgive someone who hurt me—less interested. He asks me to give up an hour of scrolling and give it to him—I'll think about it.

But Jesus is not a benefits package. The work of Jesus is not something he does *for* you. It is something he does *to* you. He has not come to fluff the pillows of your life and make it more comfortable. He has come to fully and completely transform who you are. That is a different posture. The benefits-package Jesus says, “I'm basically okay, I just need a few things sorted out.” The resurrection Jesus says, “I'm not okay. I need to be made new from the inside out.” Only one of those is the gospel.

Discussion Questions

3. John 12:9 says the crowd came not only because of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus—the proof of what Jesus could do. Read Matthew 16:24–25 together: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.” As a group, talk honestly: what are some of the “benefits” Christians today might quietly sign up for when they sign up for Jesus? Which ones are good gifts to receive, and which ones might be subtly pulling our attention away from Jesus himself?
4. Pastor Kevin made a distinction between what Jesus does for us and what Jesus does to us. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Share with the group: who is someone in your life—

someone you've known personally—who has been visibly changed from the inside out by Jesus? What did that transformation look like in them, and what did it stir in you?

3. Lazarus Was the Win

“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.” — John 12:15–16

So the crowd lines the streets, waves palm branches, and shouts about the King of Israel. The palm branches are not just a friendly welcome—in that culture, they are a symbol of national victory and political liberation. The crowd is saying: “This is the man who will throw off Rome and give us back our land.” They had been waiting generations for someone with the kind of power Jesus had just displayed at the tomb of Lazarus. And they did the math. Resurrection power plus political timing equals their guy.

Here is where the whole story turns. The crowd thought Lazarus was a sign that Jesus could win. They missed the truth: Lazarus was the win. The resurrection wasn't Jesus's audition for a bigger job. It wasn't a preview of what he could do for them if he got the throne. It was the whole point. Jesus did not come to win Israel a political victory by occasionally displaying resurrection power. He came to resurrect—to take what was dead in his people and make it alive. The palm branches were celebrating the wrong victory.

The disciples didn't see this either, at least not at first. John tells us plainly: *“his disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered.”* They thought the parade was Jesus's glory moment. Then they watched him get arrested, beaten, and nailed to a cross, and they would have said—that definitely wasn't glory. Then three days later he walked out of the tomb, and only then did they understand. *That* was the glory. Not the throne, not the parade, not the political win. The empty tomb. Because Jesus didn't come to fix the world around them. He came to resurrect the world inside them, and the cross and the empty tomb were the only way to get there.

This is why Jesus, just a few verses later, will hide from the crowd. He has to. If they keep treating him as the upgrade to their existing life, they will never receive the new life he is actually offering. And if you have ever felt Jesus go quiet on you, this may be part of what is happening. Sometimes his hiddenness is mystery. Sometimes it is formation. But sometimes—sometimes—he is gently pulling back so that you stop looking for the benefits package and start looking for him. Holy Week is the invitation to do exactly that. To stop asking what Jesus can do for you, and start letting him do something to you.

5. The crowd waved palm branches because they thought Jesus was about to be the political king who would defeat Rome. Read Zechariah 9:9, the prophecy John quotes in 12:15: “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and

mounted on a donkey.” As a group, talk through the contrast between the king the crowd was hoping for and the king Jesus actually came to be. Where do you see Christians today still hoping Jesus will be a more political or powerful kind of king than he came to be?

6. John 12:16 says the disciples didn’t understand any of this at the time—they only saw it clearly later, after Jesus was glorified. Read Romans 6:4–5 together: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too might walk in newness of life.” As a group, share a moment in your faith journey that didn’t make sense at the time but became clear later. What did Jesus end up doing in you through that season that you couldn’t have seen while you were in it?

Discussion Questions

The crowd thought Lazarus was a sign that Jesus could win. They missed the truth: Lazarus was the win. Jesus did not come to upgrade your life. He came to resurrect it.