

Questioning the Cross: Honest Questions to Strengthen our Faith

Week 5: Does it Make a Difference Today?

I. I've been out the past few weeks, and although some of my plans got adjusted, I had a powerful experience in Athens, Greece exploring a deeper partnership with an organization called:

A. [Slide]: Street Lights

The mission of Street Lights is to be an advocate for at-risk youth when it comes to their physical and spiritual wellbeing and when I say at-risk, these youth are primarily refugees that have fled warzones and areas of desolation. Athens is the front porch of Europe with some 1.5 million refugees passing through the city each year. So very strategic when it comes to sharing God's story from Norfolk to the nations. Athens is a transient city and we're praying how we might as a church connect with these refugees and help them discover their story in the context of God's global purpose. More to come on that later!

II. Today is Palm Sunday which formally marks the beginning of the Passion Week.

A. [Slide]: The Passion

may be familiar when we think of the Mel Gibson movie years back. The Passion is the formal name often given to the events that encompass the death and resurrection of Jesus. So today, Palm Sunday, begins the Passion Week and Passion Week was initiated by:

1. [Slide]: The Triumphal Entry

Jesus would enter Jerusalem for the last time before His death as He locked in on the cross.

III. For the past several weeks we've been in a series called Questioning the Cross.

A. We've looked at vital questions surrounding the cross for the purpose of strengthening our faith. Today, we'll wrap up the series in an interesting way by looking at the cross from the perspective of Jesus. You may be wondering what exactly that implies? I'm glad you asked!

B. There are 4 gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

1. The first 3 are known as the synoptic gospels which is a fancy word for having a similar vantage point.

2. Then there's the gospel of John. John is of a different flavor than the other 3 and here's the big difference: a unique perspective that only comes from time!

The gospel of John was written by the Disciple John (the one whom Jesus loved) in the 90's. Not New Kids on the Block 90's; A.D. 90's! We could look at the 60-year gap between the life and death of Jesus and John's gospel as a negative thing or we can see the hand of God and the unique perspective John provides. John was the only disciple that lived into old age, and when the Holy Spirit inspired John to write his gospel, John had had years to marinate on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. John gives us a gospel from the unique vantage point of seeing Jesus Christ as the Sovereign Lord and King of the universe! John sets the tone from the start:

John 1:1 (CSB) [Slide]: 1 In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

3. Jesus came as the humble servant of God but make no mistake He was and is the Lion of Judah! The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords! The other gospel writers start with Jesus of Nazareth and crescendo to Jesus the Christ. John begins with the grand finale and goes back through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the lens of His Lordship.

C. What's the big deal?

When we look ahead to the cross like Jesus did as He entered Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, it gives us a unique perspective that allows us to consider the question:

[Slide]: Does it make a difference today?

1. If the cross does make a difference today, what exactly is the difference it makes? Jesus gives us a powerful statement of the difference the cross will make and it's in response to the misunderstandings surrounding His triumphal entry.

2. In the gospel accounts we tend to focus on the key players: Jesus, the disciples, the individuals that Jesus interacts with, and we should. But there's another category that's often overlooked, that if we're honest, we can almost seamlessly insert ourselves into and it's this:

[Slide]: The Crowd

The nameless, faceless, fickle category that seems to be present with Jesus at almost every turn!

It's in the attitude and response of the crowd that I'd like for us to focus a bit and then see how Jesus understands His impending crucifixion.

John 12:14-17 (CSB) [Slide]: 14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written: 15 Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion. Look, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. 16 His disciples did not understand these things at first. However, when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

- a. Passion week begins with the Triumphal Entry and out of all the events surrounding the cross this event seems out of place. The crowd is ecstatic and emotive with their praise of Jesus and yet we know from Luke's gospel that Jesus looked out over Jerusalem as these events unfolded and He wept bitterly. What was the disconnect?
- b. Jesus entering Jerusalem as the King, but the King on a donkey, was rich in symbolism as the events unfolded and we also need to take note. The Passion coincided with the Jewish Passover, and rightfully so, there was a heightened expectation that God would send the promised Messiah during the time of Passover. During the time of Jesus's earthly life, the city of Jerusalem had a population of about 100,000. During the Passover Festival that number would swell to around 1 million and it was a time when Jewish nationalism was prevalent across the city. Word had spread about Jesus's miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead which had ignited into a large crowd of expectant people as Jesus entered Jerusalem that day. They responded to the King riding on the donkey with curiosity.

John 12:9 (CSB) [Slide]: 9 Then a large crowd of the Jews learned he was there. They came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, the one he had raised from the dead.

- c. They were intrigued by the signs and miracles of Jesus and wanted to see for themselves what others had reported. It's interesting that in John's gospel the Lazarus account wraps both sides of the Triumphal Entry. Look what John says after Jesus has entered Jerusalem:

John 12:17-19 (CSB) [Slide]: 17 Meanwhile, the crowd, which had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify. 18 This is also why the crowd met him, because they heard he had done this sign. 19 Then the Pharisees said to one another, "You see? You've accomplished nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

- d. Some were in the crowd that day because they were curious. Curiosity isn't a bad thing but curiosity at some point must translate into a commitment. Some saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem that day on a donkey and they were drawn to Him out of curiosity. Not inherently bad, but curiosity over what Jesus can do or the signs and wonders He can perform misses the essence of who Jesus is and what He came to do. We see that as the account unfolds.
- e. Others in the crowd that day rightly declared Jesus as Savior, but they had misidentified the enemy. Back to the symbolism that's occurring in this account, three aspects of the Triumphal Entry are important to note.

(1) [Slide]: The Donkey

The fact Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey wasn't unprecedented for a king or someone of nobility (Judges 10:4; 2 Samuel 19:26). The donkey expressed in a nonverbal way in which a king approached a city. If a king approached on a horse, it was a symbol of war or battle.

If a king approached on a donkey or colt, it was a symbol of:

[Slide]: Peace

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah foretold how Jesus would establish His kingdom:

Zechariah 9:9-10 (CSB) [Slide]: 9 Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed, and he will proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.

As the crowd approached Jerusalem that day, their need for salvation was misplaced on the wrong enemy. Israel was under Roman occupation and their expectation of a king or messiah was one who would remove the Roman authorities and establish Israel as the privileged people of God.

Two additional aspects of the Triumphal Entry let us know that.

(2) The first being expressed through the word:

[Slide]: Hosanna

It's a transliteration of a Hebrew word that literally means:

[Slide]: Give salvation now

The Israelites wanted freedom from Roman oppression, and they expected Jesus to demonstrate His authority as the King of Israel by dethroning the Romans.

The use of Hosanna alone may not be enough to draw this conclusion but when it's coupled with the final act of symbolism in the passage, it leaves no question.

(3) That is the use of:

[Slide]: Palm Branches

There's not a great U.S. crossover, but we don't have to look far to our north for a modern-day connection. The maple leaf is the symbol of Canadian nationalism much like palm branches for 1st Century Israel. By laying the palm branches in the path of Jesus the crowd expressed their desire for Jesus to restore Israel.

f. When we unpack the symbolism found in the Triumphal Entry it helps us to understand how the crowd went from a hysterical frenzy over Jesus's entry into Jerusalem to just a few days later everyone deserting Him. Jesus didn't meet the expectations the people had set.

It wasn't that Jesus couldn't meet the expectations set forth.

Jesus didn't meet the expectations of the crowd that day because their expectations were too low.

3. There are times in all our lives we can relate to the crowd in this moment. We get frustrated because God isn't meeting the expectations we have set, but given some time, I look back over those seasons and can see now that my expectations weren't too high but way too low. It's not that God was hovering on a level below my expectations but on a far higher level than the focus of my attention!

That's what's occurring on the original Palm Sunday and the Triumphal Entry!

a. The Palm Sunday crowd that had gathered was mostly comprised of two different categories of people.

(1) Those who had gathered to see what Jesus might do next. They were curious and wanted to see if they could verify the Lazarus account themselves and might even be on hand for the next miracle.

(2) The other category within the crowd were those who were indeed looking for a savior. They were genuinely confused as to why God would allow the Romans to dominate His chosen people and they longed for God to send His Messiah. The One who would remove the Roman occupation and reestablish the privileged position of God's people in comparison to the surrounding nations.

D. It's within this context that Jesus provides clarification on the significance of the cross and answers the question:

[Slide]: Does it make a difference today?

1. Let's look at verse 27 which is so cool because John gives us a unique perspective on the Triumphal Entry in that he shares Jesus's response to the crowd and Jesus's description of the difference the cross will make. It's difficult to select the proper adjective to describe the difference.

We often think of the cross in terms of our individual salvation. We should!

But that's not the only angle we should consider. The cross is a cosmic shift that reoriented the universe!

John 12:27-33 (CSB) [Slide]: 27 "Now my soul is troubled. What should I say- Father, save me from this hour? But that is why I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said it was thunder. Others said, "an angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus responded, "This voice came, not for me, but for you. 31 Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. 32 As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to indicate what kind of death he was about to die.

2. Some had gathered that day because they were curious, while others believed Jesus to be the Messiah, but had misplaced understanding on the mission at hand. They wanted a savior to fix their circumstances not the Savior who would supersede sin and death. Expectations that were too low! Jesus looks to the cross and declares that now is the time the world will be judged, and He will be the supreme authority! How? By being lifted up! Jesus was glorified and exalted by being lifted up on the cross as a substitutionary atonement for sin. That means that He willingly took on the penalty of sin which is death and in so doing He disarmed the power of Satan, sin, and death! Satan exacted a price on Jesus Christ that wasn't his due. The wage of sin is death, yet the sinless Son of God died for you and me. In our place He stood condemned. Jesus paid the ransom and in so doing achieved the victory of God!

3. [Slide]: What difference does the cross make today?

a. The victory over Satan, sin, and death has already been achieved. Do we still experience the impact of Satan, sin, and death? Absolutely! But by way of the cross they no longer hold power or dominion over us in Christ! Isn't that really great news today!

The victory that Jesus achieved through death established the jurisdiction that was rightfully His from the start! A jurisdiction that goes from one end of the universe to the other! But the universal shift in power only becomes effective for us when we accept what Christ has done. In Christ we're under a new authority! That's the grace of God in Christ Jesus!

b. What difference does the cross make today? Here's how the Apostle Paul describes it:

Ephesians 1:20-23 (CSB) [Slide]: 20 He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens- 21 far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

By way of the cross, Jesus was exalted (lifted up) above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, in this age and the one to come! When we accept the grace of God extended through Christ, Satan cannot claim authority over your life anymore. He's outside His jurisdiction!

(1) I used to speed but I stopped doing that after my drive to church today. I'm turning a new leaf! Have you ever been driving a little fast, approached or past by a police car, only to discover it's a police car from another city? A police car, no matter what, always commands a level of authority, so even if I'm not speeding, when I see a police car my natural reaction is to slow down. But if it's a police car that is outside of its jurisdiction, is it an instant relief? They're beyond their authorized jurisdiction.

E. Satan has power and authority and should be respected, but we must remember the words of Jesus in John 12. In Christ, because of what He did on the cross, we are no longer within Satan's jurisdiction! Satan has no claim to authority over our lives! Jesus was expressing that first Palm Sunday the cataclysmic shift that would take place because of His death. Our salvation impacts every circumstance and situation of our lives, but we must be reminded that our Savior, and our salvation, is far greater than any one situation. In Christ our eternity is settled because we are freed from the power of Satan, sin, and death and have permanently transitioned to the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ!