

## Walk While You Have The Light

John 12:9-36

July 31, 2022

Read John 12:9-36

This is the Word of the LORD

Years ago, when I was practicing law in Indiana, I did a fair amount of trial work. Going into courtrooms for arguments over motions got to be routine, but trials were a different animal. Trials were all consuming. For the weeks ahead of time, I would spend hours upon hours researching, studying, reading, re-reading, thinking, and planning for how things would go. I would go over my case. I would go over my opponent's case, trying to imagine how I would defend against myself. I would try this angle and that strategy. As the day of trial grew nearer, I would get more and more focused; more and more intense; more and more encompassed by what was going to happen. It was difficult to sleep. I would avoid doing social things.

As much as I wanted to appear calm and in control, I could tell physically that the trial was getting closer. It was having an impact. It was having an impact, that is, until the moment when the bailiff came in and said, "All rise, the Honorable Judge .... presiding." At that moment, I knew it was time. There was a shift. I would feel a calm come over me; that everything I was supposed to do and could do had been done and now – well, now the only thing to do was ride it through. It might not be easy or pleasant, but this was now what I had been preparing to do.

Our text today shows that transition in Jesus' life. It was the shift from one phase of ministry into the trial of his Passion week. The very simple question of Jesus' trial was this: who do you say I am? Either Jesus was who he claimed – and therefore is to be followed, obeyed, and served – or, he was not. Those two options became starkly clear from here on out. There are four sections of our text today: the plot to kill Lazarus, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus, and then Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection.

Obviously today includes the Palm Sunday text, and that gives us the context from here going forward. Jesus was headed into Jerusalem to go to the cross. For us . We have to read all of this today – and everything going forward – with the cross in view. The pace of action quickens and time is condensed; but in all of this, we are headed with Jesus to *and through* the cross.

### The Plot To Kill Lazarus

Section 1. At the beginning of our text, John noted that the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus in addition to Jesus. Basically, they were going to do away with the evidence. This is a detail I have overlooked throughout the years. Perhaps I have seen too many television dramas because my initial reaction was, "well, of course Lazarus had to go. He was a loose end." But this was not a novel. It was not a TV show nor was it a movie or play. These were real people living real lives. These events were playing out in real time. Put in modern terms: the chief priests were blatantly plotting to murder Lazarus.

As I was preparing for this sermon, it struck me anew just how hardened were the hearts of the chief priests and what that meant to real people in real life. Last week, we noted how people were acting in

something that was so much bigger than their own understanding. “They are acting for their own reasons, yet they are players in a drama that they do not understand, doing and saying things with significance beyond their imaginings.”<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry reflected on these verses like this:

To consult to hinder the further effect of the miracle, by putting Lazarus to death, is such wickedness, malice, and folly, as cannot be explained, except by the desperate enmity of the human heart against God. They resolved that the man should die whom the Lord had raised to life.<sup>2</sup>

“The desperate enmity of the human heart against God” – what a phrase! It is true, though – right? If we look around and look at how the world treats each other and how the world treats God, it is remarkably accurate.

The question we ponder is how it got to that point; how did the chief priests get so lost? The hardness of heart is something we have seen in Scripture – think Pharaoh – but these guys had the Scriptures (what we know as the Old Testament) and were commissioned to shepherd the people to their covenant relationship with God. They were the church! Now, faced with the literal coming of the Messiah for which they had prayed, they were plotting to kill and wipe out any evidence of God’s anointed. How did they get there?

Yes, God hardened their hearts. That explains it – sort of. Yet, we are left with the question, what could be more important than embracing what God was doing? They were worried about the risk to things they held dear. They were pretty clear about what they thought they were doing: you might remember last week when the leaders agonized, “What are we to do? If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” In short, they sought to maintain the institution rather than serve the One the institution was created to serve. Saving “the church” was more important than hearing the word of God. Look at the order of concern: “our holy place” and then “our nation.” Whose holy place? Who is this place intended to serve?

The lengths to which the chief priests were willing to go to preserve the institution meant a cold calculation that Jesus had to go; and if Jesus had to go, Lazarus had to go with him. The cross was getting closer.

### **The Triumphal Entry**

Section 2. Then we move to the parade of Palm Sunday. Because you already have had three Palm Sunday sermons from me, I am just going to highlight one thing here.

The Temple authorities read the situation accurately. The world *did* go after Jesus. Crowds came with him, and crowds went out from Jerusalem to meet him. But the crowds did so based on their own expectations of what the Messiah would do, which was not the same as what Jesus was doing. Where the chief priests were denying and fighting that Jesus was the Messiah, the people embraced the idea of Jesus as the Messiah – who they understood would free them from the Romans.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney A. Whitacre, IVP NT Commentary, John, p. 301

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, John, John 12.

How do we know? They cried out, “Hosanna,” meaning, “Lord, save us!” They cried out, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!” They were trying to make Jesus king, displacing Caesar. They waved palms. The palms were the logo of the Maccabean revolt from 150 years before. It was the sign of the revolution. The expectation was that Israel would prevail because God was going to intervene miraculously on their behalf to defeat the Romans.

The chief priests were concerned about maintaining the institution. They were concerned with keeping things as they were right now; they were not willing to look forward to see where God was leading. The people wanted revolution.

Jesus did one simple thing to put it all right: he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. As Zechariah wrote, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

A donkey was a symbol of peace. A donkey specifically was *not* a show of military strength or violent revolution. A donkey represented humility. So, *look*: Jesus did not scold the people; he simply took their worship and made it right. Palm Sunday was not about how the people performed in worship; it was about whom they were worshiping. They were praising Jesus. They were giving glory to God.

Let me just repeat that and hear what I am saying: Palm Sunday was not about how the people performed in worship. It was about whom they were worshiping.

To put two rather blunt points on this: first, in contrast to the approach of the chief priests, the buildings, this campus, the ministries, the missions, and the committees – yes, even the committees – are tools to be utilized in the mission and ministry for the glory of God; they are not monuments to our faithfulness. They have been created and maintained that we should open the gospel to Carson City and beyond. We maintain and preserve these spaces *for use*; they are not museum pieces to honor ourselves.

Second, although there were plenty of errors in the expectations of the people, the one thing they got right was the praise of Jesus. There are plenty of errors in our expectations and our worship, but we do try to get the one thing right. We do the best we can in worship, we want the music to be good, we want the congregation to be encouraged, I want the sermon to strike home and be convicting; but all of this is offered – not to you for your consumption – but as a gift offering before God. We trust that God takes what we offer and makes it right.

In the large and the small, in the good and bad events of life, we often will not understand what God is doing until later. John is clear about this: the disciples did not understand what was happening on Palm Sunday until after Jesus’ resurrection. Only through the cross did they remember and put things into perspective. The same could be said for us: only through the cross do we remember and put things into perspective.

### **The Greeks Wish To See Jesus**

Section 3. Then John dropped in this little episode. At some point along the parade route, there were some Greeks in Jerusalem for the Passover who wished to see Jesus. There was a bit of whisper down the lane until Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus directly. Jesus’ answer always puzzled me. But as we keep the cross in the foreground in front of us, it makes more sense, “The hour has come for the Son

of Man to be glorified.” This was the bailiff entering the courtroom saying, “All rise!” As the Word Biblical Commentary noted,

[T]he approach of Greeks to see Jesus was a confirmation of the Pharisees’ exclamation [that the world had gone after Jesus]. The Evangelist will have viewed these men as the first fruits of the Gentile world that was to own Jesus as Lord. ... the coming of the Gentiles heralds the climax of his ministry; his “hour” has at last arrived (contrast 7:30; 8:20), and it will witness his glorification. It is tacitly assumed that then will be the time for the Gentiles to come under the saving sovereignty of God.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, where previously Jesus’ hour had specifically NOT yet come, now that the world had gone after Jesus and now that the Gentiles were coming into Jesus’ fold, his “hour” was signaled. It was now time. Time for what? Time to focus on the work of the cross: the trial. Jesus said, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The work of the cross was for the glory of God and the Messiah would be glorified through it.

What followed was Jesus’ description of what was about to take place *and* it was a summation of the life of discipleship. Hear it again.

**John 12:24** Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Friends, sometimes the message is repeated so often we stop hearing it. I invite you to stop and listen – really listen – to what Jesus was saying here. He was going to die in order to bear much fruit in his resurrection. He was following this path intentionally and obediently. Hear his words to Nicodemus from that night described in John 3: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus’ mission was to save us. He did so by faithfully seeing this trial through to its conclusion – which he knew would require his death. His death – and resurrection, victorious over death – would mean that those who believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.”

The Greek men wished to see Jesus. “They were acting for their own reasons, yet they were players in a drama that they did not understand, doing and saying things with significance beyond their imaginings.”<sup>4</sup> Their request signaled that the time – the time for the Son of Man to be glorified – had arrived.

### **The Glorification of the Father**

Section 4. Then came the voice from heaven and the discussion of the prophecies related to the Messiah. Make no mistake, Jesus knew exactly what his hour meant and involved.

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<sup>3</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, volume 36, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Rodney A. Whitacre, IVP NT Commentary, John, p. 301

What did Jesus mean when he said his soul was troubled? Well, let me answer that with what I just said: make no mistake, Jesus knew exactly what his hour meant and what it involved – as the writer of Hebrews declared, “who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame” he ran with perseverance the race set before him. He knew more than we ever will the totality of the cup of wrath he was to drink in order to absolve us from our sin.

The cross was very much in the foreground for Jesus. The path to the cross was awful. It would trouble anyone. However. You were more precious to God than it was awful. I was more precious to God than the cross was awful. We were more precious to God than the cross was awful.

The transition into this trial phase of his ministry was marked by an event similar to the beginning of his ministry. There, John had proclaimed that at Jesus’ baptism he had seen “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ...I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” It was a supernatural sign.

Here, Jesus posed the rhetorical question, “What should I say?” and he gave two possible answers. First, “Father, save me from this hour!” This is what the other gospels reported in the Garden of Gethsemane. It would have been fully understandable. Yet, Jesus responded echoing the “Thy will be done” of the other gospels, “No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” Then, he gave the second possible answer with the reason, “Father, glorify Your Name.”

Then came the supernatural voice from heaven declaring, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Like the voice from Sinai, those who heard it were confused by the supernatural. Some though an angel had spoken to Jesus, others only heard it as thunder. Jesus had to interpret for them, “The voice has come for your sake, not for mine.”

“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” How was the Father’s name glorified?

God’s name was glorified through judgment. “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” All that stood, all that stands against God will be corrected. All that was blemished would be made clean through the refiner’s fire. Through the cross – through the lifting up of Jesus on the cross, his death and resurrection – he will draw all people (Jews and Gentiles) to himself.

The crowd’s response was the counter to Jesus’ declaration of victory, “We have heard from the law...” The Palm Sunday parade had not even concluded and the turning was already occurring. The people wanted the conquering hero; Jesus was talking about being crucified. They were wanting Jesus to conform to their perception and expectations of the Messiah. Jesus was revealing what was God’s plan for the Messiah. They were wanting Jesus to confirm his identity. They could not grasp that he was different than they had anticipated. They asked, “Who is this Son of Man?”

Then, came the invitation, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light.” And again, “While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”

## **Conclusion**

Over the next weeks and through these next chapters, we are going deep into the trial record. We will see how Jesus laid out his case – and his life – for us. He would provide the evidence supporting the answer to his claim, who do you say I am?

This was the beginning of Jesus' opening statement of his trial. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." How? How will he be glorified? He will be glorified through his obedient death – for us – bearing much fruit. The consequence of his being glorified is that he is to be served. We are to follow him in order to serve him. Whoever serves him, the Father will honor.

The hour *had* come. The trial had begun. A verdict would be rendered: either Jesus was who he said he was – and all that he taught and commanded would be validated – or, he was not.

Friends, with the cross in view, Jesus exhorted the people to a decision. Choose. There would be no fence-sitting. Choose. Choose this day whom you will serve; as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. What will you do? Who do *you* say he is?

Amen.

Questions:

1. Why is Jesus' trial important? How do you understand what he was presenting – and why have you decided the verdict the way you have?
2. Do you trust that you are more precious to God than the cross was awful?
3. How do you experience and live out Jesus' observation that, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also"?