

INTRODUCTION

*When you hear the word *Autobahn* (*John James Audubon*) what is your first impression? **Birds** or **BMW's**? Naturalist-painter or German highway?

*India bridge renamed "*Hamilton*" by British in colonial days. Indians pronounced it "*Amerrton*" which sounds like Indian word for "*barber*." Today it is called "***Barber's Bridge***." So what is the bridge's true name?

It depends on your **perspective**. Your point of view.

Perspective prepares you to see in a certain way. *Where are you coming from? And what are you seeing from that vantage point?* It's true, isn't it, that we all have certain assumptions, perspectives, even preconceived notions, about **politics, people, culture, life & death—and sports**.

Examples: "*rich Americans*" & "**the lazy poor**")

You realize, don't you, that we also come to the Bible with assumptions and pre-conceived notions-- If you are a veteran Bible student you have developed certain assumptions. Even if you are new to reading the Scriptures you still have assumptions but you also might have an advantage. You may come to God's Word with a curiosity and a sense of freshness...

How do you approach the gospel accounts of Jesus' Passion? Everyone knows a little about these stories. Did you know each gospel writer has a unique perspective? Could you identify those points of view?

Example: presbytery exam question: What are the *flavors* of the 4 gospels? "*Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, Neapolitan?*" They passed the young candidate giving him credit for "sheer creativity."

Each gospel writer was inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell the Jesus story with particular emphases... And each writer devotes about 1/3 of his narrative to report the events of **Holy Week**...you can discern these emphases in the respective holy week gospel narratives...

Holy Week begins with **Palm Sunday**. To appreciate Palm Sunday you need to visualize a parade featuring a red carpet of coats & palm branches; you need to recall the background of the Feast of Passover; you need to hear exuberant praise for Jesus from pilgrims visiting Jerusalem; you need to sense the gathering storm seen in the form of bitter opposition to Jesus from the chief priests; and you need to understand that Jesus acted out an OT prophecy describing a messiah-king riding on a donkey. Got all that?

How do all these elements fit together to carry out God's purposes? Did you notice John's (the gospel writer) editorial comment about the disciples?

*At 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.* Hindsight is 20-20, yes?

If the disciples did not understand the real meaning of Palm Sunday, do you suppose the crowd or the chief priests knew what was really going on? Was **everybody** in the dark? Yes, to a greater or lesser extent. Because they did not yet have the Spirit's help. In **John 14:26** we read Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would bring to *their* remembrance what the LORD said and He would help *them* understand Jesus' words... Remember and understand!

Let's review the different groups of people present on Palm Sunday and try to identify each party's perspective.

THE CROWD(S)

Actually there are two crowds that converge. One crowd is mentioned in v. 17 (with Jesus) and the other in v. 18 (went out to meet him). Both crowds have in common an interest in **Lazarus**. Do you remember the "*miraculous sign*" of the raising of Lazarus? John tells this story in (chapter 11); the story is told in some detail.

The Lazarus story begins this way, "*Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is sick.'*" (**summarize story**)

By the way, Bethany is only two miles outside Jerusalem and Jesus stayed there during Holy Week until Thursday... The raising of Lazarus attracted attention to Jesus. The miracle is reminiscent of another spectacular mighty work. Can you think of another miracle that so stirred the people? The **feeding** of the **5000**. John tells us that "*the people intended to come and make Jesus king by force*" but Jesus withdrew to the mountain by himself.

Word spread among the crowd traveling to Jerusalem for the Feast of...? The **Feast of Passover**. The crowd buzzed with the news about Lazarus and grew as pilgrims joined along the way. Meanwhile, the news about Lazarus spread into the city. So another crowd from Jerusalem took palm branches went out to meet Jesus (v. 12 and v. 18).

Two crowds, like two rivers, come together and make an even bigger crowd.

Example: Manaus, Brasil; Amazon River (Rio Negro & Rio Solimoes)

What did these crowds want? Did they want a Messiah to feed them and heal them? Did they want a king to defeat Rome and inaugurate a new kingdom of Jewish nationalism? Two elements in John's account have political overtones: **palm branches** and the **title, King of Israel**. The other gospels mention leafy branches but not palms. Palms were associated with military victories. And *Matthew-Mark-Luke* articulate the crowd's praise for the Messiah (Son of David) but do not mention this explicit king title.

THE CHIEF PRIESTS

Meanwhile, opposition to Jesus is gathering steam even as the adoring crowd is growing. What has triggered a growing opposition? The news about **Lazarus**. See v. 11. “*So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in Him*” The more Jesus attracted followers the more he posed a threat to the religious authorities and the political establishment. It still happens today, doesn’t it?

Examples: *Wei Wei, China*, Aung San Suu Kyi, **Burma**

Two groups, devoted or curious **followers** and bitter **enemies**, have been stirred by the story of Lazarus. The groups come together in Jerusalem. John is preparing us for a **showdown**, a confrontation!

Jesus provides some interpretation by acting out a **parable**. He finds a *donkey* and rides it into town—not a noble *stallion* but a lowly *donkey*. John cites two prophets. **Zechariah** pictures the messiah “*humble and riding on a donkey*” and **Zephaniah** uses the title “*King of Israel*.”

Together the prophetic passages proclaim 1) a humble ruler of peace not a mighty warrior-king and 2) not a nationalistic king but a sovereign over the whole earth concerned about Israel and all nations. This **universal** sense of Jesus’ messianic mission ironically fits the complaint of the Pharisees who said to one another (v.19), “*Look how the whole world has gone after him.*”

Yes, Jesus is a king but not like any king you have seen. Yes, he is about to be crowned but not as you or I could ever imagine.

THE DISCIPLES

Meanwhile, what are the closest followers of Jesus thinking? Are they worried about entering Jerusalem where Jesus’ powerful enemies are in authority? What do the disciples understand about Palm Sunday? All we know from John’s gospel is that they were essentially *clueless*. Only after Jesus was glorified would they finally understand. Only after the Spirit shows them would they put it all together.

The Spirit helped John to see *after the fact* what was hidden from the crowd, the chief priests and even from the disciples *in the moment*? John sees Jesus about to fulfill his mission. He articulates it a little later in chapter 12, verse 32. “*But when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.*”

John called his gospel a **Book of Signs**. Seven miracles or signs reveal Jesus... “*In him was life and that life was the light of men.*” The restoring of sight to a blind man (sign #6) is a SIGN that Jesus is the **light** of the world. The raising of a dead man is a SIGN (sign #7) that points to Jesus the giver of **life**. John wants his readers to see and believe that Jesus really is the Light of the world and is the Life everlasting.

John Newton, in his immortal hymn, says it testimonially, “*I once was blind but now I see. I once was lost but now I’m found. I once was dead but now I’m alive.*” Do you see it? Do you believe it? Can you sing it?

Palm Sunday in John’s gospel account stands as the Beginning of the *Book of Glory*. Glory has to do with seeing the LORD for who He really is. The Book of Signs points the way. But the Messiah is not as I imagined. And if I had lived among the disciples I would not have understood the signs either.

But I see it now. I see how Palm Sunday reveals Jesus with a new clarity. The Lazarus sign shines the spotlight brightly upon the carpenter from Nazareth. The parade with palms brings him onto center stage. He is un-masked as king but the nature of his kingship remains hidden. The crowd hopes for nationalistic freedom and the chief priests worry about losing power. Palm Sunday is the beginning of a confrontation. The next day’s temple cleansing only intensifies the prospect of a *life & death showdown*.

When you see the whole story unfold you realize that Palm Sunday deserves to be a muted celebration at best. It’s sunshine reduced by dark shadows. It’s a parade that leads to a cross. It is the first step that results in Jesus being “*lifted up*.” When you know the whole story you realize that glory only comes after suffering. Actually you see this in the Lazarus story...

Jesus deliberately did not hasten to Bethany when word reached him of Lazarus’ illness. When he arrived Lazarus had been dead for four days. No wonder Mary and Martha were consumed with grief. If only...

But the raising of Lazarus is not only a miracle of compassion. It is a **sign**. It foreshadows Jesus own battle with death. The cup would not pass by Jesus—neither did Lazarus receive healing before the experience of suffering and death. Both would die AND both would live again.

Jesus’ mission is not to keep us from dying. The Savior is not medicine to alleviate symptoms nor is He therapy to eliminate suffering. He saves us from being conquered by death, not from experiencing death. He offers us life beyond the grave but does not spare us the grave. He desires to share His **glory** with us but with it comes also the path of **suffering**...

Palm Sunday begins the process whereby Jesus is *lifted up*. *Lifted* into the spotlight, *lifted* into controversy; *lifted* up on a cross, *lifted* or *ascended* into heaven!

For we who have eyes to see, let us see!