

Continue to Spread the Word

John 12:9-19

John Breon

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he set off a whole series of events. Not only was Lazarus restored to life and to his family, causing them to rejoice, but many people who saw the miracle believed in Jesus. Later, many more people who hear about the miracle will come to meet Jesus.

Is there anyone who believes because of our new life in Christ? Lazarus was dead, Jesus gave him new life, many people believed, and God was glorified. Do we believe in Jesus and do we live new life in him that people see and want to experience for themselves? What kind of difference does knowing Jesus make?

Not only did the people who saw Lazarus raised to life believe, but they also testified. As word spread about what Jesus had done, a crowd welcomed and praised Jesus on Palm Sunday. Does anyone welcome and praise Jesus because of our witness?

James Bryan Smith tells about one summer when he worked as an intern chaplain at a retirement center. He says it was a pretty easy job. He did a devotional in daily chapel and visited with residents. Sipping tea with grandmothers and shooting pool with grandfathers was a pretty good way to spend a summer.

One day his supervisor said that Ben Jacobs, one of the residents, had requested a visit from a chaplain. As the supervisor gave Jim this assignment, she told him, "Good luck with this one." Jim went to Ben's room and knocked on the door. A deep voice bellowed, "Come in, young man." Ben sat in a rocker, looking very serious and important. Jim greeted him and reached out to shake his hand. Ben said, "Sit down, son," without shaking hands.

For the next half hour they talked about philosophy and world religions. Jim wasn't sure if Ben was testing him or trying to impress him. Ben's knowledge was impressive. Then Ben dismissed Jim, but shook his hand this time and asked if he could come back the next day.

For the next six days, Jim went to visit Ben and each day Ben opened up a little more. Finally, he admitted that he wanted someone to confess to. He wanted to confess to having lived a bad life.

A lot of people might not have seen it that way. Ben was born in 1910, made his first million by the time he was twenty-five, and was the richest man in his state by the time he was forty-five. He said, "Politicians wanted to be my friend. I lied, cheated and stole from whomever I could. My motto was simple: take all you can from whoever you can." He amassed wealth and power. He went through three marriages and several affairs. He had one daughter, now in her forties, who refused to speak to him.

Jim didn't judge Ben, though he was a little stunned at this grandfatherly looking man admitting to such an ambitious, selfish, and sinful life. Ben said he had ruined his life. Even though he still had plenty of money, he had no joy. He sat there each day, waiting to die. He had only bad memories. "I cared about no one in my life, and now no one cares about me. You, young man, are all I have."

Jim kept meeting with Ben all through the summer. At some point Jim told him that the only way to live was to follow Jesus. Ben admitted that Jesus was brilliant. But he felt like it was too late for him. At age seventy-five he was beyond redemption. Jim explained that redemption is God's favorite activity, regardless of our age. They met every day for the rest of the summer and the sessions became more joyful. They read the Gospels together and talked about mercy and forgiveness and opportunity to change. At the end of the summer, when it was time for Jim to leave, Ben offered him a special gift, a rare copy of an old book Jim loved. Then Ben told him that he had decided to follow Jesus, had asked for forgiveness, and felt that God had forgiven him. He had even written a letter to his daughter, asking for her forgiveness.

The last time Jim heard about Ben was when his daughter wrote to tell him that Ben had died at age eighty-eight. They had reconciled. Ben came to a saving faith and spent his last years as a changed man. Ben had told her about his summer sessions with Jim and asked her to pass on his gratitude (*The Good and Beautiful Life* 17-19, 31-32).

It's never too late in this life—and it's never too soon—to believe, to go to Jesus and find new life in him. It's never too late to spread the word about who Jesus is and what he does. Whatever age we are, we can welcome Jesus and praise him.

We also need to be aware that there's opposition to living the way of Jesus and witnessing about him. Because of what Jesus had done for Lazarus and because it led to many people going over to Jesus, the religious authorities were threatened. They determined to kill Jesus and to kill Lazarus also because people believed on account of him.

What God does threatens human power and control and authority. Are we ever afraid of losing power and control? Can we accept what God is doing even when it challenges us? Can we stay faithful and share the good news even when it's challenging?

One man told about praying with one of his children at bedtime. He asked the boy if he had any problems they should pray about. He couldn't think of any, even though his dad could think of a number! The dad decided to press the point and asked, "Don't you have any problems at school?" "No," he replied quite firmly. "Don't the kids give you a hard time because you're a Christian?" Again the answer was "No." Thinking back to his own traumatic school days, he said, "But kids always give you a hard time if you let them know you're a Christian." The boy's reply was frank beyond belief: "All the more reason you don't let them know!" And quite happily he turned over to sleep.

With the refreshing candor of the very young, he put into words the practical reasons why many Christians don't witness. We don't want to take the consequences (Stuart Briscoe, *Getting into God* 88, <https://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-illustrations/7076/consequences-of-witnessing/>).

A crowd gathered to see Jesus and Lazarus. This group seems to escort Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. Another crowd in Jerusalem hears about him and they take palm branches and go out to meet him and escort him on into the city. John is the only Gospel that specifically mentions *palm* branches. We call this day Palm Sunday because of what John's Gospel

reports. The Palm Sunday events were also set in motion by Jesus' raising Lazarus.

Roughly 200 years before this, Jerusalem was occupied by Greek armies. One of the Greek rulers defiled, desecrated, the temple. A Jewish leader named Judas Maccabaeus recaptured and rededicated the temple. The Jews waved palm branches as they went back into the temple. About twenty years later, Judas' brother Simon Maccabaeus led the overthrow of the citadel in Jerusalem. The Jews carried palm fronds as they took possession of the city from their enemies.

The crowds accompanying and welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem may have had those stories in mind. Carrying and waving palm branches would suggest military triumph and royal welcome. They were probably anticipating that Jesus would be another deliverer like Judas and Simon Maccabaeus. There was some misunderstanding of the Lazarus miracle. Anyone who could bring a dead man back to life could surely drive out the Romans. There was misunderstanding about the kind of king Jesus is. Earlier, after Jesus fed more than 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish, the people tried to force Jesus to be king. He went away from them (John 6:15). Now, he doesn't retreat because the time has come for him to be glorified. He'll be called "King of Israel" several times in the account of his Passion.

But, he's a king who's seated on a donkey, not a warhorse or conqueror's chariot. He's a king who's lifted up and glorified on a cross.

The crowds shout, "Hosanna!" That's a Hebrew word that means, "Save now!" In the Psalms, it asks God to save and help his people. Other times, it's used as people approach the king asking for help (2 Samuel 14:4; 2 Kings 6:26). The word also became an expression of praise. That's how it's used here as Jesus enters Jerusalem.

"The one who comes in the name of the Lord" was a way of talking about the Messiah, God's messenger and Israel's king. Here in John, the crowd calls Jesus the King of Israel.

In response to all this, Jesus sits on a donkey and rides into the city. He's trying to correct their misunderstandings. He's showing that he's not the kind of king they're looking for. Riding a donkey was a symbol of peace.

The prophet Zechariah had envisioned Jerusalem's king coming to the city on a donkey as a sign of God's presence.

It wasn't until after Jesus' death and resurrection that his disciples understood that the prophecies referred to Jesus and grasped the meaning of what had been done to him. John shows that after Jesus was glorified—through the cross, resurrection, and ascension—the Holy Spirit would come (7:39) and cause the disciples to remember Jesus' message (14:26). So his glorification allowed the disciples to recall what Jesus did and understand his action in light of Scripture (12:16; 2:22). Disciples of Jesus read Scripture in light of Jesus' ministry and glorification. And we read Jesus' ministry and glorification in light of the rest of Scripture. We do all this led by the Holy Spirit who continues Jesus' presence (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* 870).

It's interesting, then, to read this verse from Zechariah in its context. Actually, John also refers to the prophet Zephaniah when he says, "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion" (that's another way to talk about Jerusalem). Zephaniah assured the people that the Lord was present in the city. Now listen to the section of Zechariah's prophecy where John's quotation comes from:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit. Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you. I will bend Judah as I bend my bow and fill it with Ephraim. I will rouse your sons, Zion, against your sons, Greece, and make you like a warrior's sword. (9:9-13)

Jerusalem's king will come in peace and bring peace to the nations. He'll set prisoners free. The blood of the covenant plays an important part. Jesus is about to go to the cross and shed his blood, making a new covenant. God's king coming to Jerusalem will even impact Greece. In just a little bit, some Greeks will come to see Jesus.

Jesus comes as Jerusalem's king, Israel's king. But he comes as king of peace who gives his life to fulfill God's covenant and set people free. This freedom and peace will be offered to all nations, all people.

Now John reminds us about the crowd that saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. They continued to testify, they continued to spread the word. Those who believed served as witnesses. And more people went out to meet Jesus. That's a picture of discipleship.

What have you seen Jesus do? How have you seen him give new life—to yourself or to someone you know? What has led you to come to Jesus, to trust him, to get to know him? Who have you told about him? Who could you tell? How can you continue to spread the word?

The Pharisees saw all those folks going to Jesus and said to each other, "We're not getting anywhere. The whole world has gone after him!" Now that was an exaggeration, but it was also an unintended prophecy. It's a reminder that God loved the world by giving his Son so that whoever believes in him wouldn't perish but have eternal life. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world but that the world might be saved (Jn 3:16-17). Right after John tells about the Pharisees' worry, he tells about a group of Greeks coming to see Jesus. This prompts Jesus to talk about giving his life and how he will be lifted up to draw all people to himself.

N. T. Wright summarizes:

Each of us belongs to part of 'the world'. Our part has, most likely, only heard in a limited way of Jesus. It has probably not discovered that he was and is the true king, the true rescuer, the bringer of true freedom. As we watch his progression into Jerusalem, and on to meet his fate, we must ourselves be drawn into the action, and the passion, that awaits him. And we must ourselves become part of the means by which his message goes out to the world. (*John for Everyone*)

Have we met Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life? Do we have new life in him? Are we continuing to spread the word so the whole world can know? And so that others can meet and praise Jesus as the true King and Deliverer?

It's not too late. Wherever we are and whatever age we are, we can come to the Lord and we can spread the word.