

The Most Important Week
John 12:1–28
April 2, 2023

I imagine you have your spring traditions. One of mine is that *around* the time flowers bloom I will pull off the shelf *The Final Days of Jesus* by Andreas Köstenberger and Justin Taylor.¹ That book helpfully harmonizes the Gospel accounts into the particular days of that final week. For example, on the Monday before the crucifixion *this* is what happened. And then, *this* is what happened on Tuesday.

I've found that book to be helpful not *only* in harmonizing the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life, but *also* in humanizing the person of Jesus, at least in relation to time. Maybe we have the tendency to think of history itself as a set of facts or disconnected events. Of course, that's not the case. These moments we consider together *this* week happened in the span of *a* week, with mornings and meals and minutes and hours.

This isn't a fairy tale. What occurred came about in historical categories we understand. What we'll consider this Friday happened on a Friday. And what we consider next Sunday happened on a Sunday. And what we'll consider today happened on the weekend before. We know what a week is. We've had a few.

Yet, this week isn't like all the others. I mentioned that book's helpful and accurate subtitle: *The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived*. So, let's not go through the motions. John spent 11 chapters detailing what took place over the span of years. He'll now spend 10 chapters to cover a week. So, note first,

1. Saturday (12:1–12:11)

John 12:1: **Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was.**² It had been planned *long* before for Jesus to come to Jerusalem for the Passover. It's the weekend before. Bethany happens to be only a couple miles from Jerusalem. And that's where Lazarus was.

We've *dropped* into John's Gospel this morning, but maybe you know what had *just* happened in John 11. John 11:44: **The man who had died came forth.** That man was Lazarus. He'd come forth a mere 13 verses before our text. Yet John makes sure we haven't forgotten. Jesus came to Bethany, v. 1, **where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.** Now, Jesus loved Lazarus and his family (John 11:5). And during this important week, He's going to spend time with them. Verse 2: **So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving;³ but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.**

We'll soon see that in this scene it's not *just* Lazarus, his sisters, and Jesus. Others are there. And with others witnessing, Lazarus's sister Mary honors the One who'd raised her brother. Verse 3: **Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.** That sounds like the Mary of Luke 10 doesn't it? In Luke 10, she sits at the Lord's feet, listening to

¹ Andreas Köstenberger and Justin Taylor, *The Final Days of Jesus*.

² D. A. Carson says that Passover would begin on Thursday evening. With the Jewish understanding of days, six days before the Passover would be Friday evening. That's when Jesus arrives. The dinner described happens on Saturday. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC, 427.

³ Of course she was! (see Luke 10)

His word (Lk. 10:39). Some time has passed;⁴ He'd *just* raised her brother. And she's *still* at His feet, anointing them with costly perfume.

Of course, a pound of *any* perfume is not an insignificant amount. Yet, it seems that this was no “off-brand.” It was **pure**. So, John tells us the obvious point, that it was **very costly**. You ask, “How costly?” In a moment we'll find out it was roughly equivalent to a year's wages.⁵ Mary wasn't ho-hum, or indifferent, about Jesus. This act is an act of extravagant honor and affection.⁶

Some of those gathered think it's *too* extravagant.⁷ Verse 4: **But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?”** We talked about Judas a few weeks back on a Wednesday night. It's remarkable, at least to me, how skilled he was at the game. By game, I mean, fooling others. In the next chapter, John 13, Jesus will tell the disciples sitting around a table, **one of you will betray me** (Jn. 13:21). A few verses later, Jesus tells Judas, **What you do, do quickly** (13:27). Then, when Judas leaves this important meal, the other disciples—who'd spent a *lot* of time with him—instead of assuming he's the betrayer, assumed he was going to give to the poor (13:29). Judas is headed out to betray the only One who'd loved Him perfectly; and the other disciples think he's going to do a good work. He knew how to play the game.

John knew it soon, too, writing in verse 6: **Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.** Judas loved his money, however he needed to get it. He'd soon add 30 pieces of silver to his collection.

Judas thought, or at least he *made it seem* as if he thought, this extravagant anointing was *too* much for Jesus. Did Jesus think that? Someone mentioned Wednesday night the significance of Jesus praying in John 17 that the Father would glorify *Him*. He'd asked the Father—who shares His glory with *no one*—to give *Him* glory.

That's nothing less than a claim of divinity. Jesus knew who He was. When He was twelve, He wasn't searching for Himself. The temple was *His* Father's house (Lk. 2). In John 12, He's certainly not still figuring out His identity, nor what He's about to do. Verse 7: **Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.** That “Me,” is emphatic. In other words, John puts it in bold.⁸ Now, if someone *else*—after they were anointed with tens of thousands of dollars of perfume—said *that*, you'd think they were an egomaniac. Here is a clear example of C. S. Lewis's Liar, Lunatic, or Lord bit.⁹ This is David Koresh cult-leader psycho-babble, unless He's the Sovereign God who put on flesh. He's saying, in essence, “That money wasn't wasted. In fact, her extravagant affection for me is *right*.” Jesus knows that Mary was fashioned to adore Him. Because He fashioned her.

On Saturday, there's adoration. There's curiosity too. Verse 9: **The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.** There it is again. *As if* we'd forgotten what happened to Lazarus last chapter, John reminds us that this is the guy that Jesus raised from the dead.¹⁰

⁴ At least according to Steven Cox and Kendell Easley, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 128.

⁵ Carson, 429, based on verse 5.

⁶ Carson, 428.

⁷ And it's not just the disciple mentioned in verse 4. See Matthew 26:8

⁸ See Rob Plummer's *Daily Dose of Greek* on verse 8.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

¹⁰ Rather than thinking we've forgotten in the span of a few verses, it's more likely that John is foreshadowing.

And, of course, what Jesus did in John 11 was quite convincing. Large crowds of Jews were *already in* Jerusalem, and others were coming *to* Jerusalem for the Passover. On the list of potential excursions, a couple miles over to Bethany to catch a glimpse of the formerly dead Lazarus—now upright and breathing—that excursion was probably quite compelling.

Back in verse 1 of John 12, I skipped over the “therefore.” It’s an important word, because it points us back to how chapter 11 ended. Note 11:57: **Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.** Of course, they’d been after Him for some time. They’d been plotting, hunting Him, seeking to catch Him (Lk. 11:54).

Yet, thus far they’d been unsuccessful. John’s Gospel says this is on purpose. It’s as if *Someone* meticulously authored and was executing a plan. Note the word, “because,” back in John 7:30: **They were seeking to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.** Then, in John 8:20: **and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.** So, they’ve been coming for Him for some time. And now the religious elite had given orders that anyone who knew His location was to report it.

With that in mind verse 9 sounds more ominous: **the large crowd of Jews then learned that He was there.**¹¹ Word would’ve gotten around, surely. Then, in verse 10 we’re told more broadly the religious leaders aim. Even the chief priests are scheming: **But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to do death also.** Jesus was in their sights. He had been for a while. Why Lazarus also? Verse 11: **because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.**

That’s Saturday, in part. There’s adoration and honor from Mary and the others who’ve believed after seeing His power over death. And then there’s subplot, with Judas and the chief priests.

2. Sunday (12:12–19)

Verse 12: **On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.** When it says large crowd, we should picture seas of shoulder-to-shoulder crowds. Josephus describes one Passover where 2.7 million people took part. His numbers could be inflated, of course, but still Jerusalem was *not* a large geographic area with suburban sprawl. If even a million people were within those city walls, it’d be tight. And lots of them seem to have heard Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.

Someone mentioned Wednesday night the danger of separating the Old Testament from what’s recorded about Jesus in the New. And then Drew reaffirmed the point by reminding us that even the inclusion of “Christ” in John 17:3 picks up on the Old Testament longing for a Messiah. Christ isn’t His surname; it’s a title. And if we want to know what this Messianic longing looked like for Old Testament Jews, we get something of a picture here in verse 12: **On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.”**

The majority of their shouting quotes Psalm 118. With those words—**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord**—the Psalmist had captured much of their Messianic hope.¹² “In

¹¹ Can’t you imagine the conversation outside the Temple courts, “Where are you going?” “Oh, Jesus is in Bethany. He’s at Lazarus’s house?”

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICOT, 585.

the name of the Lord” refers to His authority.¹³ As the crowds sing that Psalm, in essence they are shouting, “Blessed is the One the Lord sends.” And when they say, “Hosanna,” they’re crying out that the One sent might deliver. It means, “give salvation now.” “Hosanna” had also become a term of praise.¹⁴ We might say that in this moment they do two things simultaneously. They extol the One whom the Lord sent while *at the same time* pleading that He might deliver them.

Had many of them heard of Jesus and the signs He’d performed? Probably. Did *some* of them believe rightly? Surely. Did *all* of them? Certainly not. If we read to the end of chapter 12, that will be clear. To be drawn in by the signs He performed is not the same as being drawn to Him (Jn. 12:37). And when we finish John’s narrative, we’re reminded that religious fervor can be fickle. A lot will happen between this Sunday and the next.

It seems clear that, though they longed for a Messiah, their Messianic notions were not perfectly calibrated. We ought to put ourselves in their sandals, facing the oppression of the pagan Roman government day after day. They, understandably, detested their subjection and longed for deliverance. Some would say they were ready to follow almost anyone who claimed to be the Messiah.¹⁵ They hoped that their King would soon ride in on a *war horse* and conquer Caesar.

They were right about Him riding in and conquering.

Yet, Jesus knows they’ve misunderstood—or at least downplayed—the *full* picture of the One promised. At this point, other Gospel accounts detail Jesus telling the disciples to find Him something. John doesn’t tell us *that*; he just tells us what was found. Verse 14: **Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.”**

Keep in mind that in a typical Ancient Near–Eastern context, a king’s arrival to a city would be marked by pomp and pageantry. Anything less would be an affront to the king’s rule. Zechariah 9:9 described a coming King’s arrival. This King—in, again, Messianic terms—would deliver. And in that passage, the prophet told Israel when He came, they were to **rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation.** All of first–century Israel might say, “so far, so good.” You might say—today—that it sounds like John 12! A King. Salvation. Shouting! But Zechariah 9:9 isn’t over. **Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

Did the disciples grasp what was happening, or make this connection, in the moment? Verse 16: **These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him.** I think it’s safe to apply John 14:26 here,¹⁶ what Jesus will say to the disciples in a few days: **the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.** It seems that *after* Jesus was glorified, and He sent the Spirit to interpret all He did—to *remind* them of what He said—at some point the disciples looked at one another and connected the dots, “Guys, remember the donkey!? Zechariah 9:9.”

This is why Mary emptied her pure, costly, treasure at His feet. She’d met a King that she knew could conquer our greatest enemy: death. She also knew that this righteous King wept when her brother died. Had she *ever* met a conquering King who was humble? Did that even exist?

¹³ We talked about that last week in James 5.

¹⁴ Carson, 432.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, TNTC, 169.

¹⁶ Carson, 434.

Further, had she ever met—or heard of—a humble conquering King that loves her? And was she communing with Him over supper?

Those that met Him, or knew Him, couldn't help but do what verse 17 describes: **So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him.** And their testimony didn't fall on deaf ears. Verse 18: **For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign.**

Those plotting both Lazarus' and Jesus' demise are, of course, flustered by this development. Verse 19: **So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him."** "See" is an imperative. They're telling one another, "Look around. We're losing."

That's Sunday, the week before Easter. Like on Saturday, there's adoration from some. We're seeing more of who Jesus is. Scripture is being fulfilled. And the elements of subplot remain. Note third,

3. The Week Ahead (12:20–28)

The Pharisees said that the world was going after Jesus. Verse 20 gives us one example of that, **Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."** So, in verse 22, Philip goes and asks Andrew about their inquiry. Then they both come to Jesus for Him to respond, v. 23: **And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."**

In John's Gospel, as mentioned earlier, the "hour" has always been future. But now, it's *now*. Jesus knows who He is. And He knows what time it is. He begins to describe what that means. Verse 24: **Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.** He'd just hinted to Judas and Mary that His day of burial wasn't too far off. He'd told them they would not always have Him around (12:8). And now He's telling this brief parable about death, and what *it* brings: **if it dies, it bears much fruit.** Jesus knows what week it is, what time it is. The hour has come for Him to be glorified.

Then, in what seems like a parenthesis, He mentions that what He aims to do that week has implications for those that hear Him. Verse 25: **He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me.** Do you see why some didn't believe? He's not selling cheap grace. He's not *just* healing and resurrecting. He also calls us to follow Him. *Where* is that? *Where* is the One going whom I must follow? Bonhoeffer was right, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."¹⁷ Isn't that what Jesus says here? To follow Him, we go where He goes. Verse 26 again: **If anyone serves Me, he must follow me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.**

Now, not to get ahead of ourselves, but is that *only* death?¹⁸ How does verse 26 end? **If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.** There's hope in verse 26, Carson writes, "the Jesus who says **where I am, there My servant will be also** is on his way to the cross *and* to his Father" (John 14:3).¹⁹

But Friday comes before Sunday. And Jesus knows that. Verse 27: **Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour"?** Jesus doesn't

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

¹⁸ Is the film paused when we're horizontal in the baptistry?

¹⁹ Carson, 439, emphasis mine.

approach facing the wrath of God, nor humanity's ire, in stoic terms. His being **troubled** here communicates the horror of this cup He was to drink. He knew the fury of God's wrath. He counted the cost. And for a people He loved, and came to deliver, He says, **what shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour?" But for this purpose I came to this hour. "Father, glorify Your name."**

Wednesday night we "listened in" as Jesus talked to His Father in John 17. Only three times in the Scriptures does the Father answer the Son—at His baptism, at the transfiguration, and here in verse 28: **Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again."**

In Jesus' incarnation and earthly ministry, John writes that **we saw His glory** (Jn. 1:14). The Father glorified His own name through His Son's life. That's why He says, **I have . . . glorified it.** And, in the week ahead, He **will glorify it again.**

Conclusion

Wednesday night we'll continue walking through another day of this week, considering the close of Jesus's prayer from John 17. Then, on Friday we'll consider how God glorified Himself on a Friday 2000 years ago. And then next Sunday we'll see God's glory in raising His Son from the dead. We consider together this week *the most important week of the most important person who ever lived.*

I almost entitled this message, "Jesus's Most Important Week." And that's true, of course. Yet *if* it's His, it's also *ours*.