

We Want to See Jesus
John 12:1-50
4/10/22

This is a big week. Not only is it holy week, but this week also marks the culmination of our year-long journey through John's gospel.

It began in the fall when we camped out in the opening chapters and looked at the light and the lamp—who Jesus is and who we are in Him. You may remember those famous words from John the Baptizer who said of Jesus, "He must increase; I must decrease."

After this we listened to Jesus as He described himself in many ways including some of the great "I Am" statements—I am the true bread, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life. And you remember most recently how we went through all of chapters 13 through 17, exploring Jesus' last words and lasting presence.

It was in John 13 that Jesus gave us His new commandment, something that not only captures the heart of the gospel but also captures the heart of who we want to be as a church. He said, ³⁴"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Everything has led up to this week, a moment when Jesus lays down His life for us and calls us to lay down our lives for others. His life laid down; our lives laid down. All for the glory of God through the proclamation of His love.¹

In the days ahead we will continue our journey in John's gospel by immersing ourselves in John 12 through John 20, and it all begins here in chapter 12.

It seems to me that from the people's perspective, the focal point of this chapter is found in verse 21 where some God-fearing Greeks came to Philip and said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus."

At this point in His ministry, at this time of the Passover festival and at this place in the city of Jerusalem, everyone wanted to see Jesus and it is easy to understand why.

It was just a short time before this that Jesus did the most stunning miracle in front of many people when he raised Lazarus from the dead. Unlike the raising of the widow's son or Jairus' daughter, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Everyone knew that all hope was gone and nothing was left but a rotting corpse.

Resurrection was commonly recognized as the first sign that God was restoring His people. So Lazarus became a walking symbol of God's restoration work through Jesus. This was something everyone was talking about and, with Passover just around the corner, everyone meant a lot of people.

It was this miracle that prompted many to put their faith in Jesus and it was this miracle that prompted the high priest to say it was better for one man to die in order that the entire nation might survive. So chapter 11 concludes with these words.

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶ They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" ⁵⁷ But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

For many different reasons everyone was saying, "We want to see Jesus."

Some wanted to see Him because of their love for Him. The day before Palm Sunday, Lazarus, Martha and Mary hosted a dinner in Jesus' honor. You can be sure it was attended by people who had seen what Jesus did and now believed in Him.

Mary's actions with the expensive perfume speak for most of the people in this group as she took the very best she had and gave it to her Lord.

I say most because Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray Jesus, was there as well. He wanted to see Jesus too, but he wanted to see a Jesus of his own making. He had expectations for what Jesus was supposed to do and when Jesus didn't fit his mold, rather than align his thinking with Jesus' word, Judas took a different path. But these weren't the only people present that day.

On that Saturday there was also a large crowd of Jews who wanted to see Jesus. They learned that both Jesus and Lazarus were in Bethany and so, in curious excitement, they came and likely gathered around the house.

Can you imagine what that might have been like as they peered into the windows and jostled for their turn to see the celebrities? But this was just the warmup for what was about to happen.

The next day was the first day of the week. Passover was only five days away and so many pilgrims had already arrived. John tells us that the great crowd that had come for the feast heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. How did they hear?

Verse 17 tells us that those who witnessed Lazarus' resurrection were out there spreading the word. "Hey, ya know the guy everyone has been talking about and waiting for, the guy named Jesus? He's coming down the Mount of Olives right now!"

We don't have any way of knowing how many there were, but estimates range from 150,000 to over two million. All these people streaming out of the city to see Jesus caused the Pharisees to conclude that the whole world was going after Him.

And as if to support their claim, the very next verse shows how right they were as God-fearing Greeks—Gentiles who believed in Israel’s God but were not willing or able to abide by all the requirements—wanted to see Jesus too.

Everyone wanted to see Jesus. Some desired it out of devotion; others out of curiosity. Some came to Him with sincere questions. They were confused and sought clarity. Verse 34.

³⁴ The crowd responded, “We understood from Scripture that the Messiah would live forever. How can you say the Son of Man will die? Just who is this Son of Man, anyway?”

I would put the disciples in this group as well. I think they were so caught up in the emotion of the moment that they weren’t sure how to understand it all. Verse 16.

His disciples didn’t understand at the time that this was a fulfillment of prophecy. But after Jesus entered into his glory, they remembered what had happened and realized that these things had been written about him.

And finally, it is important to note that not every religious leader wanted to stop Jesus in His tracks. Some wanted to see Him because they believed His teaching and His claim to being Messiah. Verse 42.

Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. ⁴³ For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.

From the crowd’s perspective, everyone wanted to see Jesus. They may have had different motives and they certainly had different expectations of what Jesus was to be like, but they all wanted to see Him. That’s the crowd’s perspective.

But Jesus had his eyes fixed on something different. His view is seen in verses 24-28.

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives. ²⁵ Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity...

²⁷ “Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But this is the very reason I came! ²⁸ Father, bring glory to your name.”

While everyone else was thinking about Lazarus’ resurrected life, Jesus was focused on his coming sacrificial death. Raising Lazarus brought a blessing to one life; dying on the cross will bring a blessing to countless lives. It would become the planted seed that produces a plentiful harvest of new lives. And right there in the middle are words of truth for us.

“Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their life in this world will keep it for eternity.”

All four gospel stories have some form of this teaching, so it is likely that Jesus spoke these words several times and in various contexts.ⁱⁱ Losing our life for Jesus’ sake does not involve hating our lives. Rather, it involves loving Him and the gospel more than everything else!

Seventeenth century Scottish pastor, Thomas Chalmers, wrote and taught about the expulsive power of a new affection. We all know how this works. It is the young man who suddenly starts putting time with his girlfriend ahead of his studies or job. It is getting so caught up in an online television series that you skip the chores that need to be done in order to binge a few more episodes.

A new affection can help us expel other things from our lives, even things that we dearly love.

Our lives are filled with loves, loves that lead us to act in certain ways. If we love being popular and liked, we avoid controversial topics. If we love comfort, technology, toys or travel we will easily say no to one thing so that we can say yes to the things we love. When we love our life and try to keep it, we pursue and protect those things we love.

Jesus tells us, if you pursue these lesser things, you will end up losing your life. However, if you learn not to care for these things you will find eternal life.

John puts it this way in his first epistle.

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires [these lesser loves] pass away, but the one who does the will of God [who loves Him above all other things] lives forever (1 Jn 1:15-16).

There are two ways for us to stop loving and pursuing the things of this world. The first is to use our logic to realize that these things hold no real benefit and then use our will power to stop pursuing them. This method may work for a season but in the end, it proves to be very ineffective. It is not long-lasting and it does not change the heart.

The second thing is to attach ourselves to something of greater importance and deeper desire so that the heart replaces the old attachment with a new and better one.

When Jesus becomes our new affection, we find ourselves empowered to let go of those things we once thought were important. Jesus said, “Let go of the things you cling to. Learn to love me more than these and you will find true life.” The desires of the world promise life but only bring death. Jesus invites us to die so that we might truly live.

Jesus had his coming sacrifice in mind and because of the joy of the harvest of many lives before Him, was able to endure the cross and despise its shame (Heb 12:2).

In verse 32 Jesus spoke directly about the cross. "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." His loving, sacrifice on the cross draws people. It woos them to want to see Jesus.

Just before COVID hit the owner of a Catholic bookstore told me about a conversation she had with two men from China. This was their first time in our country and so they were just walking around to enter stores and experience our culture. Eventually one of them pointed to a crucifix on the wall and asked the owner what that was and what it meant. The owner shared the gospel with these two men explaining how the Father sent the Son to offer payment for our sins by willingly giving His life on the cross. With that the man pointed at the crucifix again and said, "So, this means love! Jesus offers love to me."

And when I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.

Everyone wanted to see Jesus, but Jesus wanted everyone to see the cross so that all people might be drawn to Him, reorder their love and affection toward Him and so find new life in Him alone.

Things haven't changed much. Most people who have heard about Jesus would want the chance to meet Him if they could. Some love Him dearly and are willing to give Him the very best they have as they surrender everything to His love and lordship. Others are using Him for their own benefit, waiting for the day when Jesus will finally become the person they want and expect Him to be. Some seek Him because they are curious. Others do so out of habit. I mean, this is Holy Week. "We always come to church this time of year. It is what we do."

So this makes me wonder. As we enter this most wonderful and terrible of weeks, what is your reason for wanting to see Jesus?

If you seek Him you will find Him and when you do, what might He say to you? Is there some way He may ask you to lay down your life for Him and for the sake of the gospel? Is there some bottle of "perfume" in your life—a precious thing that you hold tightly—that you may need to pour out for Him in some way? Or maybe it is an idea or a dream that He is inviting you to surrender into His care.

Or maybe He is offering you something a little different. The last few years have been terribly hard on many people. Perhaps you have become so worn by the burdens you carry and the needs you try to meet that you wonder if you can make it another day. Maybe His invitation to you is not a surrender to do or let go of more, but a surrender to rest in His full acceptance of you in Christ. Maybe it is simply to surrender more fully to His love so that His life and power may be more fully released and give you what you need to take another step.

No matter what your situation might be, how might He invite you this week to receive more of the life He has for you?

It is His death that brings us life. So I encourage us to set this week apart from every other week in some way.

May I suggest that we each find time this week to read through or listen to this entire gospel again? The YouVersion app is a wonderful tool for easily carrying the text that can be read or listened to.

Then, after you read or listen, then talk about what you encountered with your friends, your family, your Bible Study or your small group. Make a point to engage God's word with others and then be alert to the work God does in you.

In whatever way you can, use this week as a time to ponder His life, His death and the life He gives to anyone who will but only cling to Him more than anything else.

Prayer

Jesus, we want to see you. We know you and the Father are one so that when we see you we see the Father too so help us see you this week. Meet us through the gospel record and provide what we need to more fully receive what you have to offer us.

It all seems to center on that cross, Lord. The world saw shame, but you received glory. The world saw death, but you were offering life, true life, real life, indestructible life! We confess that we don't think about it much but this week, would you please help us ponder what happened on your cross and what your love and the life you offer means for us today.
Amen.

As you ponder His life this week, may Jesus become that new affection that replaces all others in your life.

ⁱ I need to say here that while our Lord's self-sacrificial love for others is an example we are to follow, it is also an atoning sacrifice that redeems us from the power of sin and death. He did both and so one without the other is not a complete picture. We have been bought at a great price so that we might live a new life. Jesus is the model for how that new life will look, and the forgiveness of sins that allows His indwelling Spirit is the power that enables us to follow Him.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:34-37; Luke 17:33