Palm Sunday: To See the Glory of God

SPEAKER	Steve Hawthorne
DATE	Sunday, April 2, 2023
PASSAGES	Psalm 24; John 12; Luke 10; John 11; Deuteronomy 15
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:07:34 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Palm Sunday was not spontaneous. The crowd came because a dead man was walking around Bethany — and that man was only raised because Jesus deliberately arrived four days late. Jesus is not a miracle worker who fixes things. He is the resurrection and the life, and what he is bringing is not a repair. It is glory.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Palm Sunday is the one event in Jesus' life that all four gospels tell at length, and it was the only part of that week most of Jerusalem actually witnessed. Only a few hundred saw him die; no one saw him rise.
- The donkey was not a humble little joke. Solomon rode a royal donkey to his coronation in that same place, so riding one down that road was Jesus declaring himself the son of David.
- The crowd assembled around Lazarus, not around a sermon. People came "not for Jesus' sake only" but to see a man who had been dead for four days.
- Martha and Mary said the identical sentence to Jesus — "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" — and meant opposite things by it. One was an accusation; one was worship at his feet.
- Martha believed every correct doctrine and had still abandoned hope. Right beliefs about a future resurrection can sit on top of a settled expectation that God will do nothing now.
- Jesus did not answer grief with an explanation. He wept — and the watching crowd concluded not that he taught well about suffering, but that he loved.

- "Seeing is believing" is exactly reversed here. Jesus says: if you believe, you will see the glory of God.
- Lazarus was resuscitated and later died again. Jesus rose with a life that cannot die, and that life is what he gives.

▶ 1:07:34

Steve Hawthorne has been part of Hope Chapel for more than thirty years and has preached Palm Sunday here roughly fifteen times, the first in 1996. This year he wanted to do something he had not done before: instead of the procession itself, look at what came before it — what prepared the crowd, and what Jesus was actually signifying.

1. Don't overlook Palm Sunday

▶ 1:09:35

Steve made a point that is easy to miss. Palm Sunday is "the crescendo, the loud and long thing in all four gospels" — Christmas is tucked into two of them. And in terms of what people saw, it was the spectacle of the week. A couple hundred at most watched him die. No one at all watched him rise. But the procession could be heard across Jerusalem.

We tend to skip past it, he said, because the cross and the resurrection are the parts that are plainly about us — our sins, our eternal life. Palm Sunday can feel "all wasted on it's just all about Jesus." That instinct is worth examining.

2. What you would have seen and heard

▶ 1:13:46

The noise carried. The whole city was stirred, and the question moving through it was a question of identity: who is this? The crowd's answer was "the prophet Jesus of Nazareth" — a real answer, and not a large enough one.

What they shouted came from Psalm 118, part of the psalms sung leading into Passover. *Hosanna* is a plea, not a cheer: *hoshia*, save, with *na* as an intensifier — God, save us, for real. And the crowd added a line the psalm does not contain.

> "So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'"
>
> JOHN 12:13 ↗

▶ 1:16:38

Luke says "the whole multitude of his disciples" began to praise God for all the mighty works they had seen (Luke 19:37–38). Steve pressed on that word. Not twelve men — thousands of people who considered themselves followers, hundreds of stories being traded in the road. *He healed my mother. I saw it.*

And the donkey was not random. Steve pointed to Zechariah 9:9, then to something we lose entirely. Since *Shrek*, a donkey reads as a small comic animal. But David had a royal donkey, and Solomon rode it to his coronation on that very ground a thousand years earlier. Everyone in that road knew whose animal that was. Riding it was a claim: *I am the son of David.*

3. The miracle that gathered the crowd

▶ 1:18:35

> "When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead."
>
> JOHN 12:9 ↗

That is the engine of the whole day. Two crowds blended: those who had been at the tomb and were still talking about it (John 12:17–18), and the enormous Passover crowd in from other lands — including Gentiles wealthy enough to travel, who could not enter the temple and so found Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:20–21). Wouldn't you want to see a dead man walking?

4. Two sisters, before the tomb

▶ 1:24:33

We meet Martha and Mary first in Luke 10:38–42. Martha welcomes Jesus into her home; there appears to be no man of the house. Mary is at his feet, and the text says she is listening to "the Lord's word" — meaning he was not making conversation, he was teaching. Martha is distracted with much serving and asks Jesus to intervene.

"Martha, Martha," Steve said, lingering on it. "I love that when he says her name twice. He only does that with a certain kind of tenderness. It's an expression of intimacy — *I know you*."

▶ 1:28:28

Then the message came from Bethany, and it was not an argument. The sisters did not try to talk Jesus into anything.

> "So the sisters sent to him, saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' But when Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.'"
>
> JOHN 11:3–4 ↗

And then the sentence that makes the whole account strange: "So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:6). Steve did not smooth this over. Does God want to be noticed in some weird way? How exactly is he glorified by this? Later Jesus says plainly that Lazarus is dead and adds, "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there" (John 11:14–15). Steve admitted he does not fully understand it, and said he had been told it helps when people who know the scriptures say out loud what they cannot yet explain.

5. The same sentence, twice

▶ 1:33:33

Here Steve slowed down and told it as a scene. Martha hears first, and rushes out so quickly that mourners follow her, not knowing why. She comes up the narrow road in bright sunlight, head down, and blurts it out.

> "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.'"
>
> JOHN 11:21–22 ↗

Her tone was proper. It barely covered what was under it. She and Mary had sent a runner many miles; a day passed, then another; they watched their brother sweat and slip away, sure Jesus was coming. He did not come. "She swung the words through the air like a weapon," Steve said — "an accusation, and that's exactly what she meant them to be."

▶ 1:37:19

Jesus answers, "Your brother will rise again." Martha gives the doctrinally correct reply — the resurrection on the last day (John 11:23–24) — and Steve read her as refusing to be fooled twice. "A spasm of anger roiled through her heart. She couldn't let herself get fooled again, expecting Jesus to do good things in the here and now." Maybe in the afterlife. No more false expectations.

> *"She believed all the right things about Jesus. But even though she had believed correctly, she had abandoned hope."*

What Jesus gives her is not an explanation but another of his great *I am* statements: "I am the resurrection and the life… Do you believe this?" (John 11:25–26). She says the true thing. And then, tellingly, she simply goes away — no resolution, nothing tied off.

6. Mary at his feet

▶ 1:43:14

Mary comes running, and says the identical words — but she falls at his feet and weeps, and means something entirely different. She is not accusing him of failing to love Lazarus; she already knew he loved him. She is grieving *with* him, because he has lost someone too.

Steve noted what Jesus does not do. No platitudes, no consolation about someone maybe getting saved at the funeral, no attempt to persuade her that death was God's doing or God's desire. Instead he was "deeply moved in his spirit" — a term, Steve said, close to enraged, something rumbling and ready to act — and then two words.

> "Jesus wept."
>
> JOHN 11:35 ↗

The shortest verse in nearly any language, and possibly the deepest for what it reveals. The onlookers did not say *what a profound teaching on suffering*. They said, "See how he loved him" (John 11:36). Others in the same crowd asked the other question, the one that never goes away: could not he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying? (John 11:37) If God is loving and God is all-powerful, why this?

Mary's words were not framed as a prayer, but they moved him to act. "Our best praying," Steve said, "pleads with God to act according to what's already in his heart." Isaiah says he carries our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4); whatever we have endured in the long war with death, God has carried deeper.

7. Believing, and then seeing

▶ 1:52:30

At the tomb, Martha is Martha — four days, there will be an odor. And Jesus reverses the terms of the whole day:

> "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"
>
> JOHN 11:40 ↗

Not creedal assent, Steve said, but trust that is expectant — hoping God is doing something marvelous rather than merely fixing things up. Then Jesus prays out loud and says why: "for the benefit of the people standing around" (John 11:41–42). He took the posture of prayer so no one would file him away as a magician, and so that what happened next would be remembered as something God had done. He left himself followable.

Then, not a prayer at all — a command. "Lazarus, come out." And the dead man came out bound hand and foot (John 11:43–44). John calls it a *sign*, and a sign points at something. Not what Jesus can do. Who he is.

> *"Seeing is believing — but Jesus says if you believe, you will see."*

8. Mary's third appearance, and Judas's objection

▶ 2:00:04

There is no protocol for a funeral that ends with the man alive, so they threw a dinner. Martha served. Mary came in with pure nard worth a full year's wages, broke it, poured it on his feet and wiped them with her hair. Judas objected, and John supplies the reason he objected — he kept the money box and helped himself (John 12:4–6).

Steve stopped to defuse the line people misuse. "The poor you always have with you" is a quotation, and the passage it comes from says the opposite of what it is usually made to say:

> "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"
>
> DEUTERONOMY 15:11 ↗

Helping the poor is commanded and permanent. What is not permanent is this moment. "You do not always have me" (John 12:7–8). Mary, Steve noted, was the one person in the room who had listened when Jesus said he would suffer and die, and believed him — she had just learned what death does to a body, and she came to prepare his. Mark's account renders Jesus' verdict as "she has done a beautiful thing to me" (Mark 14:6).

Three times we see Mary, and every time she is at his feet: listening, weeping, and pouring out her best.

9. Not a resuscitation

▶ 2:07:03

Lazarus was resuscitated. He died again — there was a second funeral. Jesus rose with a different kind of life altogether, one that will never die, and that life is what he gives. He does not merely grant resurrection; he *is* the resurrection.

Steve brought it to the present without softening it. Shootings, tragedy, *where was God*. And the weather report, as he put it, is clear: more people are suffering for Christ's name now than at any point in history. His answer was not a solution but a person.

> *"Our Lord is not just a miracle worker. He is the king — and he's not just improving things and fixing things. He's outdoing himself, bringing about something altogether glorious."*

The service had opened with the same claim, sung and read: "Lift up your heads, O gates… that the King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24:7–10). Human hearts are made to yearn to see beauty come forth, and that beauty is glory. Steve left the room with the question rather than an answer: has he not told us that if we believe, we will see the glory of God?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Psalm 24:7–10
- John 12:13
- Luke 19:37–38
- Zechariah 9:9
- John 12:9
- John 12:17–18
- John 12:20–21
- Luke 10:38–42
- John 11:3–4
- John 11:6
- John 11:14–15
- John 11:21–22
- John 11:23–24
- John 11:25–26
- John 11:35
- John 11:36
- John 11:37
- Isaiah 53:4
- John 11:40
- John 11:41–42
- John 11:43–44
- John 12:4–6
- Deuteronomy 15:11
- John 12:7–8
- Mark 14:6

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Steve said we tend to skip past Palm Sunday because it seems to be “all about Jesus” rather than about us. Where else does that instinct show up in how you read the gospels?
2. Jesus deliberately stayed two more days. What do you do with a God who is late on purpose?
3. Martha and Mary said the same sentence and meant opposite things. Which of the two is closer to how you have brought a loss to God?
4. Martha believed all the correct doctrine and had still quietly stopped expecting anything now. Where have you settled for “someday” because “now” disappointed you?
5. “If you believe, you will see the glory of God.” What would believing expectantly change about one specific situation you are carrying into this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Steve Hawthorne has been part of Hope Chapel for more than thirty years and is invited to bring messages from time to time. By his own count he has preached Palm Sunday at Hope roughly fifteen times, beginning in 1996. He teaches with a scholar’s attention to Hebrew wording and to the customs behind the text, and he has traveled and taught internationally, mentioning conversations about this passage as far afield as Morocco.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygry_QilP20&t=4054s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.