

24. Jesus, the Seed that Must Die

John 12:20-36

The Gospel According to John

In his narrative of the life of Jesus, John makes a transition in chapter twelve. His focus now becomes the events of the week that led up to Christ's crucifixion. The air was full of excitement after the raising of Lazarus from the dead, a sign to the Jewish people that the Messiah had come. Everybody wanted to see Him and listen to Him. ¹⁸“Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!’” (John 12:18-19). Hundreds of thousands of Jewish people were arriving from many countries near and far in preparation for the Festival of Passover in Jerusalem. Visiting with them were Gentile Greek God-fearers or, perhaps, converts to the Jewish faith.

²⁰Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival.

²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. ²³Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

²⁴Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me (John 12:20-26).

The Warm Accepting Heart of Jesus

What was it about Jesus that made Him so attractive? What made people want to follow Him and leave everything to be with Him? Think about it. He was not like the faith healers or self-help gurus that we have in abundance today. He did not promise prosperity, happiness, or self-actualization; in fact, he offered quite the opposite. Instead, He spoke about the emptying of self, yet people of all nationalities and social classes were drawn to Him and hung onto His words. When people were around Jesus, they knew they were accepted. We each have a universal need for acceptance and widespread hunger for truth. We are instinctively drawn to those who mirror this image.

George Washington was once accompanied by some other men on horseback when they came to a fast-flowing river with no bridge. It could be crossed, however, on horseback at a certain ford in the river. Just as they were about to enter the water, a man came up who had no horse asking George Washington if he could ride with him across. When all the men came safely to the other side the man was asked why he singled out the president for a ride. He replied that he did not know it was the president but that he had looked upon all the faces of the men as they approached the river, and Washington's face was the only one that had an accepting look on it.

As one reads through the testimony of Christ's followers, it seems evident that it was not only His teaching to which they were drawn, but also they were attracted to His character, i.e., the actual person of Christ Himself. He made time for others. He showed acceptance to everyone:

children, the poor, the disabled, the paralyzed, leprous, prostitutes, and even tax collectors. Jesus is the face of God to humanity. If grace has a face, it is Jesus. No wonder people thronged to Him and wanted to be near Him.

In the passage that we are studying, some Greek people came to the Passover Feast. These were not Grecian Jews, but Greek Gentiles that had traveled across the Mediterranean Sea for the annual Feast of the Jews in Jerusalem. They sought out the disciple named Phillip and asked to see Jesus. Why did they seek out Phillip? It could be because Phillip had a Greek name (the same name as Phillip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great). Perhaps, they thought that they would have special favor if they approached someone whom they believed may have a Greek heritage and hoped that Phillip would introduce them to Jesus. □

Up until that point, most of the followers of Jesus came from among His people, the Jews, but this was about to change in a way that the disciples at this time would not have been able to imagine. Wouldn't you love to spend an hour with the Lord Jesus and look into His beautiful eyes and accepting face? Over the last three and a half years of His ministry to the Jews, perhaps His fame, His name, and His reputation had already started to spread.

John makes no mention of it, but the other three Gospel writers each testify that, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey –thus announcing His kingship to all of Jerusalem, He entered the Temple area and overturned the money changers tables. Those who sold doves in the Court of the Gentiles suffered the same fate. Jesus said to them, “**My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it into a house of thieves**” (Mark 11:17). It could be that these men seeking Jesus saw His zeal the day before to restore the Temple to be a house where all men could worship the Lord and not just Jews. God desires that all nations should seek after Him.

Question 1) What attracted you to the Lord Jesus? Was it due to a specific need in your life? Share what drew you to the person of Jesus Christ. □

Whatever you think it was that drew you to the Lord Jesus, it was God at work in you, for no one comes to Christ without the work of God in him or her to bring that person to Christ. Jesus said:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day (John 6:44).

The Hour Has Come

God has used all kinds of things in your life and mine to draw us to the Lord Jesus Christ, just as He did the Greeks in the passage we are studying. When Andrew and Phillip brought their request to the Lord Jesus, Christ replied that the hour had finally come, i.e., the hour of His glorification through suffering on the cross. Jesus replied, “**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified**” (v. 23). In at least two instances in the past three and a half years of ministry, Jesus had spoken of a specific time for which He had been waiting when He would glorify the Father. It wasn't a literal hour of time, but a short period when, in one act, He would bring great glory to the Father. When His mother, Mary, had asked him to intervene at the

wedding at Cana in Galilee, he talked about His hour:

“Woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. **“My hour has not yet come”** (John 2:4).

Again, when Jesus was teaching in the Temple area, the priests and Pharisees sought to arrest Him after He had told them the truth that the Father had sent Him, but no one was able to lay a hand on Him because the time of the sacrificial Passover lambs to be slaughtered had not yet arrived:

²⁸Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, ²⁹but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.” ³⁰At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, **because his hour** had not yet come (John 7:28-30).

It is most likely that Jesus did meet with the Greeks, but John does not say. What he did tell us was that the Gentiles’ seeking after Jesus was a sign that the time had now come, i.e., the hour was at hand when Jesus, by one final act of obedience, would glorify the Father. The Lord went on to say:

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat **falls to the ground** and **dies**, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:24).

Question 2) Is Jesus talking about Himself in verse 24 or about everyone? What did He mean by the imagery that the seed must first fall to the ground and then die?

The Substitutionary Seed That Must Die

Everything that Jesus did was as a model for those who would follow Him. In the analogy of a seed falling to the ground, it is possible that Jesus was speaking of the life of humility, that the "way up" is the "way down." His example to us was that, when the enemy was in a position of power over us, God's way was not to retaliate but to submit ourselves to the Father.

It is also a beautiful truth in the Scriptures that the life of God given to the Church came in seed form in the Lord Jesus. The seed put into the ground speaks of the Lord Jesus carrying your sin and mine and nailing it to the cross. If Jesus had not died as a substitute on the cross, His life would have affected only a few. However, the question could be asked, “Why was it necessary for Christ to die such a brutal and violent death? Surely, the Father could have planned an easier death for His Son?” The answer, I believe, is this: only a violent death could have exposed sin in the way it so sorely needed revealing. One preacher said, "Could Jesus have exposed sin in all of its foul horrors if He had died in His bed, or by accident, or by disease?" It is one of the tragedies of human life that we fail to recognize the destructive and ugly nature of sin. God's plan was for Christ to die as a substitute for all who would put their faith in Christ's work on the cross, i.e., His death for theirs, to atone for sin and bring us peace with God. There is another example of this kind of substitutionary legality found in history:

During a war between Britain and France, men were conscripted into the French Army by a kind of lottery system. When someone's name was drawn, he had to go off to battle. On one occasion, the authorities came to a certain man and told him he was among those chosen. He refused to go, saying, "I was shot and killed two years ago." At first, the officials question his sanity, but he insisted that was indeed the case. He claimed that the military records would show that he had been killed in action. "How can that be?" they questioned. "You are alive now!" He explained that when his name first came up, a close friend said to him, "you have a large family, but I am not married, and nobody is dependent on me. I'll take your name and address and go in your place." And that is indeed what the record showed. This somewhat unusual case was referred to Napoleon Bonaparte, who decided that the country had no legal claim on that man. He was free. He had died in the person of another.¹

From the viewpoint of God, when Christ died, He died as a substitute to release you from the legal claims that Satan had against you because of your sin. Christ died for you and as you. God saw Christ as taking your place just as the one man went to war in another's place. When Christ died, God saw you as having died, too. Paul the Apostle explained these truths in his letter to the Colossian Church:

Since **you died with Christ** to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules (Colossians 2:20).

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³**For you died**, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

Let's think more deeply about what happens when a seed is buried in the ground. The darkness of its tomb, time, and the elements in the soil work on the seed until the outer husk cracks open, and the life inside the seed puts forth roots and grows to become a plant that reproduces itself into many seeds. Through His death, burial and resurrection, the Lord Jesus came to give us His life. We received physical life from our forefather, Adam, but Christ came to provide us with the life of God, and this life is imparted to us when we wholeheartedly put our faith and trust in Him. When we believe, our sins are washed away, and the Spirit of God baptizes us into the spiritual organism of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). The life of God flows into each of us that are connected to Him by faith.

In a different analogy, Jesus spoke of this connection as He is the Vine, and we, who are Christians, are the branches. As long as this life of God flows in us and through us by our faith, the life-sap of the Vine reaches others and bears fruit (John 15:4). Connection to Him is the key. Paul talked about this mystery being kept hidden from the Jewish people for generations (Colossians 1:26-27), but now, through the Apostles and early church, the new seeds began to appear. When the Spirit of God came in power on the Day of Pentecost, the first plants from the seed given at the cross started to flow into those first three thousand. Christ began to live in the

¹ *1500 illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Edited by Michael P. Green, Printed by Baker Book House, Page 360.

temple of all men, i.e., Jews and Gentiles that would seek Him with all their hearts. Paul, the Apostle, wrote, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). The early disciples conveyed the revelation that God no longer lives in temples of stone made by men (Acts 7:48), but within the hearts of those who will bow the knee to the Lord Jesus and follow Him with all their hearts:

²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:26-27).

Question 3) Paul called the mystery of Christ in us “glorious riches” and the confident expectation (hope) of glory. How can we begin to comprehend and experience these riches here on earth?

The Call to Take Up Our Cross

This thought of Jesus being the seed that brings new life to everyone that receives Him is the predominant analogy that John is seeking to convey, but in a similar sense, all those who are in Christ Jesus must also die to themselves so that Christ may live in us and through us. As a seed or kernel of wheat is planted into the ground, the seed must crack open its shell and die to itself so that the life that is within, Christ in us, may be given to others.

We always carry around in our body **the death of Jesus**, so that the **life of Jesus** may also be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4:10).

As Christians, while we hold on to our self-life and live our lives only for our happiness and comfort, we will, at best, be minimally fruitful for Christ. For this life to be modeled and passed on to a younger generation, it requires the voluntary taking up of our cross so that the life of Jesus may be manifested through us. You cannot take up the cross for your family or even for your spouse. All of us must decide for ourselves the degree to which we would like to bear fruit with our lives. Those of you who have a spouse and even children must determine, along with them, the degree of sacrifice you wish to make with your life. Before I married my wife, Sandy, I sat down with her and told her the things that were on my heart to do. We agreed together on the kind of life that we have lived together since our wedding in 1980. I promised her hardship and difficulty, but I also promised her my love and faithfulness. The call to take up the cross and be fruitful for Christ's sake is not an easy one, but it is what we are called to do as disciples of the Lord Jesus. He clarified this for us in the Gospel of Mark:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).

The cross that Jesus calls His Church to take up is a call to die to self. On this topic, writer Grant Osborne, says:

Taking up the cross was a very specific metaphor; when the Romans made Jesus or anyone else bear their cross to the place of execution, they were giving them a message: “You are already dead!” To take up the cross is to count your self-life dead to the things of this world. That person will “keep (his life) for eternity” (John 12:25). The disciples must become like their master; death is the path to life.²

Coming back to our passage in the Book of John, Jesus carried on His thoughts by saying to his disciples:

²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

The first two instances of the word, “life” (underlined) in the above verses, is the Greek word *psyche*, which means physical life or one’s self-life. Jesus is saying that, if you love your self-life in this world and you are oriented around just pleasing yourself, i.e., self-fulfillment, or self-enjoyment, that is selfishness. That kind of heart attitude is what should have been broken when you came to the cross of Christ at your conversion. When we see and follow the example of Christ, it will lead us to triumph over the world system and the satanic and demonic forces against which our Lord Jesus and His followers are warring. I could give you many examples of disciples of Christ in the New Testament who took up their cross, but instead, let me share the inspiring story of a pastor who faced down Communism in the country of Romania in the 1970s:

Pastor Tson of Romania

It was late in the summer of 1977, and Romania was under communist rule when a Baptist minister put all his worldly concerns in order after the manner of a dying man. Buoyed by the courage of his wife, Elizabeth, Pastor Tson prepared himself for certain martyrdom. He was to meet an officer from the secret police in the restaurant of a nondescript Romanian hotel. The communist officer had pledged to do what previous secret police officials had failed to do: silence Tson's ministry by offering him a secular job in exchange for a promise that he would never again preach the Gospel. Turning down the position would mean hard labor in a prison camp. It might very well mean execution. Tson met with the man and without flinching turned down the job.

I told the man, “Now I am ready to die,” Tson said. “You said you were going to finish me as a preacher. I asked my God, and he wants me to continue as a preacher. Now I have to make one of you two angry, and I decided [it is] better [to] make you angry than God. But I know you, sir; you cannot stand this kind of opposition, and you will kill me in one way or another. But I accepted that, and you should know that I have even put everything in order and made ready to die. But as long as I am free, I will preach the Gospel.

The communist officer was equally unflinching in his response: He told Tson to go and preach the Gospel. “He [the officer] made up his mind that if I was ready to die for it,

² Grant R. Osborne, *The Gospel of John Commentary*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary. Published by Tyndale, page 185.

then I should have it," Tson said. "And for another four years, until they exiled me, I continued to preach with nobody disturbing me because that man, a key man in the secret police, decided I should be free to preach because I was ready to die for it." He was arrested and imprisoned several times in Romania during the 1970s and charged with being a Christian minister. Each time he underwent several weeks of intense interrogation, beatings, and mind games before finally being exiled from the country in 1981.

When the secret police officer threatened to shoot me, I smiled, and I said, "Sir, don't you understand that when you kill me, you send me to glory? You cannot threaten me with glory. The more suffering, the more troubles, the greater the glory. So, why say, 'Stop this trouble?' Because the more [suffering], the greater the glory up there." During one particularly harrowing session of interrogation, Tson told his inquisitors that spilling his blood would only serve to water the growth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Part of the theology of suffering, he learned, was that tribulation is never an accident but is part of God's sovereign plan for building His church.

I told the interrogator, "You should know your chief weapon is killing. My supreme weapon is dying," Tson said. "Now here is how it works, sir: You know that my sermons are on tape all over the country. When you shoot me or crush me, whichever way you choose, [you] only sprinkle my sermons with my blood. Everybody who has a tape of one of my sermons will pick it up and say, 'I had better listen again. This man died for what he preached.' Sir, my sermons will speak ten times louder after you kill me and because you kill me. In fact, I will conquer this country for God because you killed me. Go on and do it." Dying for the Lord is not an accident. It's not a tragedy. It's part of the job. It's part of the ministry. And it's the greatest way of preaching.³

Tson said he learned that Christians suffer for two primary reasons: as witnesses to the Gospel and to perfect the Church of Christ. He recalled being encouraged by a valuable truth that a British theologian taught him: The cross of Christ was for the propitiation of sins, but the cross each Christian is called to bear is for the propagation of the Gospel.

Jesus is Troubled

²⁷Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour." No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name! Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. ³⁴The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this

³ <http://www.persecution.com/public/40years.aspx>

‘Son of Man’?” ³⁵Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. ³⁶Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid from them (John 12:27-36).□

Question 4) Jesus said that He was inwardly troubled by the thought of going to the cross. What thoughts do you think may have been going through His mind?

We struggle to be holy when our natural tendency, our default nature, is toward sin. It was entirely different, though, for our Lord Jesus. He had never known sin. He has always been Holy. He was born of a virgin and by the Holy Spirit. Christ was not conceived in the usual way, and, therefore, He did not take on a sinful nature. He remained free from sin all His life so that he would die as an innocent Lamb for us and as us. The Apostle Peter had been around Him for more than three years, and he said about Christ: “**He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth**” (1 Peter 2:22).

As a Holy being, Christ’s inward troubling was the thought that He would put on sin and be the living embodiment of sin. His striving was not against sin, but to be the living embodiment of sin when every fiber of His Holy being cried out against sin. “**Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You cannot look on wickedness with favor**” (Habakkuk 1:13). His default nature, every impulse of His divine being, was to hate sin, and yet He had to put on sin to make us holy. How wonderful is His love! “**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The cross that awaited Him was not just physical suffering, as horrible as that was. He was also to face separation. Jesus had to abandon His holiness and embrace sin, and not only sin, but all sin, of all time, and for the whole human race. It was to be the first time Jesus would experience being separated from His Father and take upon Himself the sin of the entire world. He became sin for us.

The Father Himself spoke audibly for all to hear that were listening to Christ’s words (v. 28). Jesus said that this voice was for the benefit of the crowd hearing Him. The Father was making it clear that He was about to glorify His Son. The time was drawing near. The Lord then made it clear that they should believe in the light while they had the light among them, knowing that He would soon be departing. He wanted them and us to become “children of the light,” and He was already thinking of those He was leaving behind. His most important thing was to spend the remaining time with the twelve. When Jesus surrendered His body, He left behind children of light. Now, He is glorified, just as the Father had said. We, His children of light, will share in His glory as we will also share in His suffering while we are here. Some have a heavier weight of suffering, but they will also have a heavier weight of glory.

Prayer: Father, I pray that, as children of light, You would help us to shine in the darkness. Give us the attitude of Christ so that we can glorify You in all that we do. Amen!

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