

The Harvest of Self-sacrifice

John 12:20-26

BI: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the crowds were electrified with excitement by the belief that Jesus was Israel’s long awaited Messiah. This resulted in an event Christian tradition refers to as Palm Sunday. It was, in fact, Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We observed last time that this was the absolute high point of Jesus’ public ministry. Throngs of people met Jesus on the road to Jerusalem waving palm branches, singing and shouting things like Hosanna! (i.e. Save us! Deliver us!), and “Blessed is the he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the Son of David, the King of Israel. People were laying their coats down before the donkey Jesus road to form a makeshift “red carpet.”

This was a fantastic event; a massive spontaneous reception for the One the people had concluded must be the promised Christ, the King of Israel. And the most important part about it was that Jesus accepted their praise, honor, and worship as King. In fact, when the Pharisees confronted him in the middle of all the commotion shouting, “Rabbi! Rebuke your disciples!” Jesus replied, “I tell you if these become silent the stones will cry out!” It was an absolutely glorious moment in the life of Jesus Christ.

You just have to know that when all of this took the disciples were convinced that Jesus was surely going to set up His kingdom right now and right before our very eyes! This was the moment they had been waiting and hoping for. This was what Israel had hoped and prayed for, for centuries! But also... it wasn’t to be. When this spontaneous reception of Israel’s King had subsided, instead of speaking to his disciples about how to set up His ruling administration (with His disciples as heads of government and state), Jesus began talking about sacrifice.

Read John 12:20-26

The key theme in this passage is NOT triumph, or victory BUT sacrifice. Jesus would establish His kingdom not upon warfare strategy and military might, but upon the intentional, selfless, and substitutionary sacrifice of His own life. In fact, this passage is not only about Jesus’ sacrifice but the sacrifices His people willingly offer as they follow their King.

I. The Sacrifice that Reaps a Harvest of Glory:

1. The key to interpreting this passage is found in v. 24, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This is the law of the harvest. Before there can be harvest, there must be sacrifice. And Jesus’ mission on earth was to bring many sons to glory. And not only from the Jews, for he also

said, “I have other sheep who are not from this fold. I must bring them also” (Jn. 10:16). This is what Jesus came to do, and it is exactly what we find happening in this passage.

2. Read 20-22

3. Clearly this passage is a continuation of the previous one because John mentions the people who were going up to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. These were men, women and families who came from all over the known world to worship at the temple of the Lord. But they were NOT all Jews. Among them were some Greeks. Now this is interesting because we don’t normally think of non-Jews coming to Jerusalem to worship, but the reality is God made provision for the nations to come to Israel and worship him.

4. You may remember some time ago when we were learning about the Temple that by far the largest courtyard in the Temple complex was the Court of the Gentiles. God had made provision for non-Jews to come to the temple and worship and experience the blessing His presence. In this case it was a group of Greeks. “Like the Roman Cornelius (Acts 10) or the centurion who had a synagogue built [for the Jews] (Luke 7:2-5), such God-fearers were attracted to the Jewish way of life without formally converting to Judaism. They were admitted to the court of the Gentiles but forbidden entrance into the inner courts on pain of death.”¹

5. It’s likely that had come from a group of cities on the east side of the Sea of Galilee called the Decapolis, which was largely inhabited by Greeks. In any case, these men knew it was time for Passover and they had come with the Jews to worship. When they arrived, they apparently found the Jewish crowds ringing with talk about Jesus. They may even have witnessed the triumphal entry with their own eyes.²

6. In any case, it seems clear that these Greeks had already heard about Jesus. After all, He had been teaching, healing, and performing many miracles for the past three years, and some of His ministry took place in regions where there were large concentrations of Gentiles (probably Greeks). They had, no doubt, also heard that Jesus had performed the most stunning miracle of all, Raising Lazarus from the dead. This may have been the event that moved them from being passive spectators to active seekers of a personal audience with Jesus. Perhaps they had questions about His teaching. Perhaps, like Nicodemus, they wanted to learn more about His offer of eternal life.

7. As Leon Morris elaborates, “The general tone of this Gospel leaves us in no doubt as to the point of the inquiry. Jesus was the Savior of the World, and this group of Gentiles symbolically represents the world seeking its salvation from Jesus.”³ But we will never know for sure.

8. The fact is we aren’t told what these worshiping Greeks wanted to say to Jesus. We

¹ Andreas Kostenberger, *John*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2004), 377

² Robertson, A. T. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Jn 12:20). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John Revised Edition*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 526

have no record of Jesus actually speaking with them. As soon as Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that a group of Greeks want to speak with Him, Jesus says something that sounds completely disconnected from the flow of the story.

Read v. 23 “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

9. The request from the Greeks for this interview apparently stirs the heart of Jesus to its core. Their arrival seems to have been the signal from heaven that Jesus had been waiting for. It told him that His passion was about to begin. It told Him that His mission was almost complete. It told Him that after many years of living as the son of a poor carpenter and then a single mother, and 3 years of exhausting itinerate ministry, His mission was almost complete. In less than a week He would be glorified.

10. As Andreas Kostenberger explains, “Jesus’ assertion that “his [hour] has come” is startling. Up to this point all references to Jesus’ “[hour]” in John’s gospel were future:

- A. John 2:4, Before turning the water into wine Jesus told His mother, “Woman... my hour has not come.”
- B. John 7:30 The Jews “were seeking to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.
- C. John 8:20, After telling the Pharisees they did not know God, they were angry, but “no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.”

11. Here in chapter 12, all of that changes. Now the hour of Jesus’ passion [had come].”⁴ We may have expected Jesus to say, “The hour has come for the Son of man to be Crucified. But NO! “The hour has come for the Son of man to be GLORIFIED! Soon He would die for the world. Soon He would be raised from the dead – leaving an empty tomb attended by angels. Soon He would appear alive and well before hundreds of awe-struck people. Soon all authority would be given to Him in heaven and in earth. And within a matter of weeks He will ascend before their eyes back into the heaven from which He came to be seated at the Right hand of God! It won’t be long before the Son of Man is glorified.

12. This sacrifice of Jesus will reap a harvest of glory.

II. The Sacrifice that Reaps a Harvest of Salvation:

1. In verse 24 the phrase “I tell you the truth” introduces a statement of importance. Jesus wants us to pay special attention to what He is about to say.

Again, let’s read 12:24

2. John doesn’t fill in the details of what happened after Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, but Mark tells us (Mk 11) that Jesus once again found that the temple courtyard had been transformed into a marketplace (the Bazaar of Annas). He was furious and began driving out those who were buying and selling and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves and He wouldn’t permit

⁴ Andreas Kostenberger, (2004), 378

anyone to carry merchandize through the temple (Mk. 11:15-16). Obviously, this did nothing to ease the tension between him and the Sanhedrin. In fact, they redoubled their efforts to destroy Him.

3. On his way out of the temple that day He pronounced a curse on a fig tree and by morning it was withered from the roots up. It was a symbol, a picture of God's curse upon Israel for rejecting God and His Messiah from the heart.

4. It was in this context that Jesus said to His disciples, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus knew He was going to die. He knew the Jews (with the help of the Roman soldiers) would murder Him. In fact, this had been the plan from the beginning. In fact, look down at v. 27, "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour."

5. You see, Jesus came to earth as a grain of wheat. But what do you do with a grain of wheat? You don't put it under glass to admire it. You don't lift it up on a pedestal to revere it. You don't lock it away to protect it! NO! A grain of wheat is to be drilled into the earth where it (metaphorically speaking) dies. Only then can it rise again out of the earth multiplying itself many times!

6. This is how Jesus viewed the his final Passover feast. It wasn't time to be enthroned as King. It wasn't time be revered as a great Prophet. It wasn't time to protected by an army of loyal subject. It was time to be a grain of wheat. It was that is put into the ground to die in order that eternal life might be given to a host of men and women without number to the praise and glory of the Father. This is the purpose for which the Word became flesh.

5. John R.W. Stott brings this into clearer focus when he writes:

Although Jesus was brought to his death by human sins, he did not dye a martyr. On the contrary, he went to the cross voluntarily, even deliberately. From the beginning of His public ministry he consecrated Himself to this destiny.⁵

In His baptism he identified himself with sinners (as he would do fully on the cross), and in his temptation he refused to be deflected from the way of the cross. He repeatedly predicted his sufferings and death... and steadfastly set himself to go to Jerusalem to die there. His constant use of the word must in relation to his death expressed not some external compulsion, but his own internal resolve to fulfill what had been written of him. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," he said. Then, dropping the metaphor, "I lay down my life... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord (Jn. 10:11, 17-18)."⁶

6. You see, beloved. Jesus didn't come simply to be an example of how we are to life. He came into the world in order to die. He came as a grain of wheat. He came to be the suffering Savior who would bear our sins in His body on the cross. He came to die once so that we might have life forever.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IVP Books, 2006), 64

⁶ Ibid, 64

7. The Gospels use a technical term to speak of how Jesus went to the cross. The GK is paradidomi (to hand over). Repeatedly we read Judas handed Him over to the Jews, and the Jews handed Him over to Pontius Pilate. And Pilate handed Him over to the executioners. All of this is true. But ultimately, Jesus handed Himself over to those who would nail Him to the cross.

A. Hence Paul could write, “The Son of God... loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20; cf. Eph. 5:2 and Lk 23:46).

B. Mark 10:45 Jesus said, “For even the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.”

8. You see, Jesus died like a grain of wheat so that many would live. It would be because of Jesus; death that...

A.Gen. 22:16 Jesus would fulfill God’s promise to Abraham, “because you... have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore;

B.Hos. 1:10, “Yet the number of the sons of Israel Will be like the sand of the sea, Which cannot be measured or numbered; And in the place Where it is said to them, “You are not My people,” It will be said to them, “You are the sons of the living God.”

C.Rev. 7:9 John writes, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

9. Don’t you see it, beloved? This is why Jesus came. His was a Sacrifice would reap a great harvest of salvation.

10. We have seen the Sacrifice that reaps a harvest of Glory. The Sacrifice that reaps a harvest of salvation. Third...

III. The Sacrifice that Reaps a Harvest of Reward:

1. Read v. 25

2. Jesus now turns his attention away from His calling and onto ours. Jesus’ words here are presented in the idiom of a typical Hebrew proverb with two antithetical lines which present a paradox; namely, that “losing one’s life is the condition for gaining new life.”⁷

3. This was not a new teaching for Jesus. Luke records a similar statement where Jesus says,

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple (Lk. 14:26-27).

4. I realize our time is about gone this morning, but it must be noted that Jesus is calling us to view NOT only His life as a grain of wheat, but our lives as well. He knows that many of His followers will be given a very grave choice: Renounce Jesus or lose your life! In such cases, Jesus promises, it is better give His life than betray his Lord.

⁷ Andreas Kostenberger, *John*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2004), 379

5. Being Jesus' disciple means you follow Him. In fact He says as much in v. 26, "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am there my servant will be also." In other words, You are only my servant (my disciple) if you follow me, and I am not going to Disney World. I am going to the cross. I am not attempting to save my life and pad it with all the comforts I can afford, but I am giving my life a ransom for many.

6. You see followers of Christ do not live for themselves. We live to serve Christ and serve others. But the irony here is that sacrificing our own desires for the sake of Christ and others is actually the path to Real Life and evidence of Eternal Life.

7. We would expect Jesus to say, "Who ever loves his life will KEEP it." But No! "Whoever loves his life will lose it." Literally, anyone who loves his life IS Destroying it right now. If you live for yourself, you lose everything. But if you lose yourself for Christ and others, you gain everything that God has promised for you in Jesus.

8. Most of us will likely never face the prospect of martyrdom. But every day we must decide whether to live for self or live for Christ and our neighbors. The whole of Scripture teaches that real joy and blessing is found not in attempting to save our lives and preserving our comforts, but giving our lives for the glory of God and the good of others. This is the sacrifice that reaps the harvest of reward.

9. Jesus underscores this truth at the end of v. 26, "If anyone serves me, My Father will honor Him." Now that's the ultimate reward, isn't it? On the last day to hear the Father say, Well done good and faithful servant."

10. Two things we learn from this text. First, Jesus did not come to serve Himself, but to sacrifice Himself for others. Second. We are called to follow in His steps by not living to pad and protect our lives, but to give them away for the good of others and the glory of our King. This is life indeed.

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