

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-Seven: True Glory
Commentary

John 12:20-50

12:20–22. Some interpreters have speculated that Philip may have been a Greek since he had a Greek name, but that cannot be confirmed. Furthermore, we are not surprised that some Greeks came to worship at the Passover. As they approached Philip, he chose to contact Andrew; and they came to the Lord together. Not until we open the Book of Acts do we really grasp the significance of how Gentile salvation will glorify Jesus and fulfill God's plan. But at various places in the Gospels we find the foundations of this grand plan of the evangel for all nations, and this is one of them. Did Jesus interview the Greeks? We do not know, because the mention of Gentile visitors provoked the announcement of verse 23.

12:23–24. Up to now the hour has always been coming, but now it has come. Rejection by the Jews coupled with interest by Gentiles evoked the parable of the seed. Only when the kernel of wheat dies does new life come, and that is what will happen to Jesus. Like seed, he will be planted in the ground; and like that seed, he will give birth to a glorious new plant. Indeed, it will produce not only a plant but many seeds.

12:25–26. Not only does this principle of dying and rising apply to Christ; it becomes a whole mindset for his followers. As Tasker observes:

The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die that it may produce fruit. Even so, eternal life for the many comes through the sacrifice of the One. And the same providential law is applicable to each individual believer. He must disown the imperious authority of his selfish ego, if he is to live the life of an integrated person; he must abandon ruthlessly a self-centered existence lived in conformity to the standards of the world, if the higher element in him is to be preserved unto life eternal. This he cannot do by himself. He must have an example to follow. Jesus is that example. By looking to Him, a life of service to Him is made possible; and that life of service constitutes the "dying in order to live" which is the theme of Jesus' teaching in this passage (Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel According to Saint John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, p. 148).

The word life is mentioned three times in verse 25. But the first two translate *psuche* and the third *zoe*, an obvious difference referring to life in this world (physical) and life eternal. But what does verse 25 mean? Presumably this call to obedience is predicated on the demonstration that Christ would do anything the Father asked. Those who wanted to follow him (whether disciples or inquiring Greeks) had to follow that same pattern.

12:27–29. Along with the time of dying, there is also a time for judgment. We see the emotional trauma in Jesus' heart as he pondered the cross, refused to retreat, and asked that God would be glorified through his death. Then, for the third time in Scripture (first the baptism, then the

transfiguration), the heavenly Father spoke from heaven with a promise to do precisely what Jesus has asked.

Interpretations differ on what the crowd heard. Jesus' prayer had already been answered, since the Father had already glorified his name. How? Surely the immediate reference aims at the life and work of Jesus up to that point and the immediate projection at the death, resurrection, and ascension. But we do not stretch the text to see the sweeping hand of God's glorification going all the way back to creation and all the way forward through the ages to the gathering of the church.

Westcott says, "This glorification was not a mere repetition but a corresponding manifestation of the Father's glory. Glorification during the limited, earthly ministry to Israel was followed by a glorification answering to the proclamation of the universal Gospel to the world" (Westcott, p. 182).

12:30–33. Jesus told them plainly that judgment (krisis) was coming, and deliverance from that judgment was faith in his work on the cross. Once again the reference to Jesus being lifted up centers not on exaltation but death. The cross forms the centerpiece of the gospel. And verse 33 shows us that John had no intention of drawing his readers' focus anywhere else. Here we must go a bit further in our understanding of verse 32: But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. Certainly the Lord had no intention that we should read into this text the idea that everyone would be saved because we know only believers find eternal life.

Morris takes this view on the subject: "We must take the expression accordingly to mean that all those who are to be drawn will be drawn. That is to say, Christ is not affirming that the whole world would be saved. He is affirming that all who are to be saved will be saved in this way. And he is speaking of a universal rather than a narrowly nationalistic religion. The death of Christ would mean the end of particularism. By virtue of that death 'all men' and not the Jews alone would be drawn. And they would be drawn only by virtue of that death" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 598–99).

12:34. This business of being lifted up did not fit with the first-century idea of the Messiah who will remain forever. How does this "Son of Man" prophecy fit in with our religion? Jesus favorite name for himself threw the crowd into consternation. How could a dead prophet throw out the Romans and restore the kingdom? Indeed, though the title occurs sixty-nine times in the Synoptics and twelve times in John, they could not grasp the connection. They asked, Who is this "Son of Man"? Intellectual and religious confusion had set in.

12:35–36. John's key word life in just a few verses now changes to light—hardly a new concept since John introduced it early in the first chapter. He expected his readers would understand that Jesus was talking about himself as the light of the world. But the immediate crowds on that day still struggled. Surely the disciples would have remembered the moments immediately

following their receipt of the news about Lazarus's death. On that occasion Jesus told them "a man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light" (11:9).

Again, he warned that the light would soon be gone, but individual torches can be lit from the original flame and go on burning in the darkness, even when that flame is withdrawn.

Morris notes an interesting grammatical switch in this text. The words put your trust in at the beginning of verse 36 appear in the present tense, emphasizing continuous belief but become late in the verse occurs in the aorist, pointing "to a once-for-all becoming sons of light. While faith is an activity to be practiced without ceasing, one does not become a son of light by degrees. One passes decisively out of death into life (5:24)" (Morris, p. 601).

How do we pray when our souls are troubled and crisis threatens to crush our lives? Surely the appeal of the Lord to glorify the Father offers an example for us.

12:37–41. After dealing with life and death, chapter 12 of John ends on a note of faith, with the first reference to faith in the prophets. Notice the phases of unbelief in this section. In verse 37, they ... would not believe; in verse 39, they could not believe; and in verse 42, they would not confess their faith. This unbelief, John tells us, fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 53:1). They had denied for so long that God closed their eyes and hearts. This is another citation from Isaiah—Isaiah 6:10. Whether or not Isaiah knew it at the time, John assures us he saw the glory of Messiah Jesus and spoke about him often in his writings.

As we read verse 40, we are reminded of God's dealings with Pharaoh centuries before. Indeed, Isaiah himself begged God to show his merciful side to the people to whom he sent his prophet (Isa. 63:15–19). But how can we understand the human responsibility of those whose eyes had been blinded and whose hearts had been deadened by God himself? Carson has an interesting observation on this question:

If a superficial reading finds this harsh, manipulative, even robotic, four things must constantly be borne in mind: (1) God's sovereignty in these matters is never pitted against human responsibility (cf. notes on v. 38); (2) God's judicial hardening is not presented as the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen; (3) God's sovereignty in these matters can also be a cause for hope, for if he is not sovereign in these areas there is little point in petitioning him for help, while if he is sovereign the anguished pleas of the prophet (Is. 63:15–19)—and of believers throughout the history of the church—makes sense; (4) God's sovereign hardening of the people in Isaiah's day, his commissioning of Isaiah to apparently fruitless ministry, is a stage in God's "strange work" (Is. 28:21–22) that brings God's ultimate redemptive purposes to pass. Paul argues rather similarly in Romans 9:22–33 (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 448–49).

12:42–46. The second element of faith in this section is faith in the Father. How sad that even those leaders who wanted to trust in Jesus felt they could not—a fear not unlike that of many people today. Even those who escaped the divine blinding insisted on being at best “closet Christians” not for fear of their lives, but because they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

How are we to take the effectiveness of their faith? Westcott says, “This complete intellectual faith (so to speak) is really the climate of unbelief. The conviction found no expression in life ... the belief only lacked confession, but this defect was fatal” (Westcott, B. F. *The Gospel According to John*. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958, pp. 185–86). I disagree with Tenney, especially in the light of the three verses which follow in which John seems to indicate that Jesus equated the frightened faith of the leaders with the genuine faith of salvation. This would also be a great representation of the remnant idea—God preserving a small number of trusting people even in the midst of great public opposition.

In verses 44 to 46, Jesus offered a mini-resumé, emphasizing again that he was God, light, and the Savior. Did these people at the feast come to see the Lord Most High? They needed only to look and listen to the message of his Son. No one must remain in darkness, for the light has come to dispel it. As Boice points out, “When the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world and shone as God’s light, he exposed the darkness of the world as no one had ever done previously. And of course, those who had a vested interest in things as they were hated him for exposing their darkness and eventually had him crucified” (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 389).

12:47–50. What will be the basis for judgment of the final day? That is the issue as this chapter comes to a close with a focus on faith. The answer, centers not in the person of the Lord Jesus; he came into the world to save it, not to judge it. The focus of judgment will be the actual Word of God. God’s words through Jesus as well as through the prophets and other biblical writers form the final authority for obedience. They are the message of faith. God will ultimately judge people by how they received and responded to what the Bible says. This is not a common invitation in John 12, but a command to turn away from darkness to light and from death to life.¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).