

Jesus on His Death

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One of the things that the men decided at the last business meeting was that we were going to tinker with our Sunday-morning format. Rather than having all three mini-sermons address the same topic every week, we're going to start mixing in some Lord's Supper discussions that aren't tied to the main subject. I thought I'd start that this week.

Every first day of the week, each one of us considers the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ to us. This morning, we're going to address that topic from a different angle. We're going to see what Jesus had to say about His own death.

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There are several different places in Scripture where we see Jesus engaged in contemplation of this sobering subject, but we're going to look particularly at His words in the middle portion of John 12. I won't be putting those passages up on the screen this morning, so I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles there.

This text begins with Jesus' discussion of **A GRAIN OF WHEAT**. Read with me from John 12:23-24. In context, this is a strange comment for Jesus to make. In the verses immediately preceding this, some Greeks said they wanted to see Jesus, so a couple of the apostles came to Jesus to ask Him about it. Jesus, however, never answers their question. Instead, He embarks on this agricultural reflection, which shows that the subject has been on His mind.

We are very accustomed to the so-called Christian paradoxes: that if we try to save our lives, we will lose them, that the only treasure we can keep is the treasure we give away, and so on. Jesus here points out that paradox is a part of God's creative vocabulary, not only in the spiritual realm but also in the natural realm. He points to the example of a grain of wheat. By themselves, grains of wheat are pretty durable. If you take one and put it on a shelf, it will sit there, apparently unmarred, for years or decades. On the other hand, if you take that same grain of wheat and stick it in the ground, the grain of wheat will be completely consumed, but it will produce a stalk of wheat that has a whole head of grains. The only way that the grain of wheat can accomplish anything is through its own self-sacrifice.

What's more, Jesus says this immediately after observing that the hour has come for Him to be glorified. This isn't Jesus' observations on the cycle of life. This is about Him. Somehow, He expects to be glorified by being completely used up like a grain of wheat. I'm sure the apostles found this utterly confusing.

Jesus continues, though, to discuss what **FOLLOWING HIM** means. Look at John 12:25-26. Here, we shift from natural paradox back to Scriptural paradox. As we've observed before, Jesus loved to be provocative in His teaching, to say things so shocking that they would make anybody step back and say, "Whoa! Hold on for a second here!" It is part of our nature for us to love our lives. In times of stress, human beings will do nearly anything to go on existing. And yet, Jesus says that if we love our lives, we will lose them. The only way we can keep them eternally is by hating them. Sure, if we're having a bad day, we might say to ourselves sarcastically, "I hate my life!", but that's not what Jesus is talking about. He's talking about loving Him so much that we are willing to sacrifice even our own selves.

Next, Jesus says some things that we're used to hearing, but that in context, are frightening. If we want to serve Him, we have to follow Him. In context, that means that we have to follow Him down below the ground and die just like the grain of wheat did. If we want to be like Jesus, we have to die completely to ourselves like He did, not merely initially in the waters of baptism, but daily. If we do that, then where Jesus has been, we will go: to heaven, yes, but also before the hate-filled mob, also in suffering upon the cross, also in the clammy silence of Joseph's tomb. Where Jesus went, His true servants will go there too. To our natural reasoning, this kind of service seems like the worst possible way to get ahead, to make a name for ourselves. And yet, Jesus reveals that this is yet another of those Christian paradoxes. God has no interest in the proud and self-exalting, but He will honor the one who humbly surrenders everything he has.

This can seem detached, but Jesus reveals that He is anything but when He rhetorically asks, "**WHAT SHALL I SAY?**" Consider John 12:27-28a. If we've read the previous four verses with a light heart, we're missing the point. If we truly get what God is saying, it will unsettle us, and Jesus here reveals how deeply He is unsettled. He really, really, really doesn't want to go to the cross. However, there's no sense in asking God to rescue Him from what is about to happen, because His suffering and death was the whole reason for His coming. The grain of wheat, Jesus, and indeed we ourselves all have the same purpose: to die. If we seek to avoid that, we subvert our purpose.

Instead, Jesus calls on the Father to glorify His own name, and we don't have to hear Jesus say these words to hear His emphasis on the word "Your". The only way for Jesus to face what God required of Him, and indeed the only way for us to face what God requires of us, is to put ourselves out of our minds. If we allow self-interest, even self-preservation, to creep into our thinking, there's no way we're going to do what He wants. Instead, we must think only of Him, and what outcome He wants from a given situation, regardless of what it costs us to make that happen.

John then recounts **GOD'S ANSWER** to His inward conflict. Let's consider John 12:28b-31. There is a sense in which this heavenly reply is disturbing, and a sense in which it is reassuring. After all, Jesus' words have made clear that what will glorify God is Him going to His death on the cross. His Father replies by saying, "Yes, that's what's going to

happen, because it has to happen for My name to be glorified.” On the other hand, though, it is a reminder that God is always going to be glorified, no matter what, and those who serve Him are going to be glorified along with Him.

The response to this endorsement from above is fascinating. A voice has literally spoken out of heaven, but the people who don't want to believe in Jesus find a way to persuade themselves that they have heard something else. Some are open to the possibility that it might be an angel, but generally, the reaction is, nope, it was thunder. Sometimes we might think that our work in spreading the gospel would be easier if only God would talk out of heaven to people instead of us having to persuade them with the Bible. The reality is that for most, even a voice out of heaven wouldn't help.

Jesus' response to this unbelief is interesting. He tells the crowd that the voice sounded not for His sake, but for theirs, and then He notes that judgment has come upon the world. Here's what's going on: God didn't speak from heaven because He was under any illusion that it would get the crowd to believe in Jesus. Instead, its purpose was much like the purpose of the Old Testament prophets—to convict rather than to persuade to repentance.

Jesus concludes this portion of dialogue with His clearest words yet about **HIS FATE**. They appear in John 10:32-33. To Jesus' audience that day, and to those who are completely ignorant of the story of Jesus, being lifted up sounds like a good thing. It reminds me of the kicker who kicks the game-winning field goal being carried off the field by his teammates. Jesus, though, is going to be lifted up on a cross and die on it. Nonetheless, even this ironic exaltation is going to be enough to draw all men to Himself, both in that day and for the thousands of years since.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's draw one central truth out of this. Jesus knew. He knew all along that His ministry would end with His capture, humiliation, suffering, and death. In His last week of life, this foreknowledge consumed His thoughts. I suspect that on that week, time for Jesus both seemed to race ahead and drag on forever, as He wrestled with His fears about what was going to happen. And yet, He went on anyway. He walked with open eyes into a cruel and vicious death, and He did it for us. However, His words make clear that His love and self-sacrifice are supposed to be an example for us. We're supposed to follow in His steps. Do we? Let's ponder these things as we partake.