

COMMITTED TO THE TASK
John 12:20-37, 42-50

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Introduction

Preceding our present passage, John shares the miraculous story of Jesus calling his friend Lazarus back to life. Instead of rejoicing, however, the religious authorities are even more threatened by the wonder worker. With the chief priests and Pharisees enjoying the status quo of the Roman Empire, they decided that anyone who could awaken the dead must himself die. As John writes, “So from that day on they planned together to kill Him” (11:53).

In the first part of chapter 12, Mary, Lazarus’s sister, anoints Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair and filling the house with fragrance. As we approach our focal text, verses 12-19 relate Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem during the time of the feast (Passover). This account of the Triumphant Entry climaxes as the people declare, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (12:13). The pilgrims fill the air with messianic expectations, as they have hope that Jesus is finally the one! The Pharisees are fearful that their plan to stop Jesus is “too little, too late” (12:19).

The Hour Has Come (12:20-23)

If we are not careful, we will miss it: the importance and the impact of the fact that, at last, “Greeks” are seeking Jesus. These were not just any Gentiles, but, rather, foreigners who were attracted to Israel’s God and the festivals that celebrated his acts of redemption. Earlier, the Pharisees had declared, “Look, the whole world has gone after Him” (v. 19). In the very next verse, John gives evidence that the Pharisees are, indeed, reading the situation rightly. As readers, we can be grateful to John for his inclusion of this short, but significant, story about the Greeks who seek Jesus.

These foreigners attending the Jewish feast most likely were “God-fearers,” Gentiles who respected and feared the God of the Jews, but who were not willing to cross the line as full converts by being circumcised.

The significance of this story surfaces when we look at Jesus’ reaction to the Greeks’ interest in conversing with him. He declares, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (v. 23). The fact that Greeks were actually seeking the Jewish Savior was an indication to Jesus that it was now time for him to die for the WORLD. As he approaches Jerusalem to die, he no longer simply belongs to Judaism, which had rejected him, but to the whole world, which now seeks him as Savior.

While we will never know exactly why the Greeks chose Philip to be their connection to Christ, we should, at least, note that his name is Gentile, as is that of the other character in this story,

Andrew. Bearing Greek names, it might be that Philip and Andrew were the ones most comfortable with the Greek culture and language. These Greeks represent no less than the nations seeking their salvation from Jesus.

While John gives us no record of Jesus' conversation with the Greeks, John does provide us with the significance of their search: The hour of Jesus has arrived. One can hardly make too much of this message from our Messiah. "The hour has come" calls us to remember the other occasions when the hour or time had "not yet" arrived. For example, Jesus responds to his mother Mary's request that he do something about the insufficient supply of wine at the wedding in Cana by asserting, "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). In John 7, moreover, Jesus' brothers seek to hasten Jesus' clash with the authorities in Jerusalem. Responding to their request that he "show himself to the world," Jesus replies, "My time is not yet at hand..." (7:6, 8). Finally, after Jesus goes to Jerusalem—not at the bidding of his brothers, but on his own accord—the Jewish authorities seek to seize Jesus. They were not, however, able to lay a hand on him because "his hour had not yet come" (7:30).

Therefore, when we finally hear the announcement that "the hour" of Jesus has arrived, we know that it is a clear indication that his very Passion is upon us. His hour refers not simply to his death, but also to his resurrection and glorification. New Testament scholar Edward Klink observes, "This is the grand irony of the gospel. The hour of the glorification of the Son of Man...is made manifest on the cross (i.e., the place of suffering, humiliation and shame)!"

The Seed Must Die (12:24)

The metaphor of the seed is a picture of "being planted." This image is akin to the picture that Paul paints in Romans 6 when he says that we both die with Christ and rise with him (Romans 6:3-5). A principle lesson of the gospel is that—with Christ—life comes through death! Part of the paradox of the gospel is that God most often saves his people through death rather than from death. When we stand at the graveside of a family member, God has not been defeated; we have not been deserted. The seed has been planted so that as it dies with him, it might also rise with him. Upon planting, a farmer does not lose a seed, but gains fruit, just as the Father, through the death and burial of the Son, gains many children.

Loving Life and Losing It (12:25-26)

A seed which might refuse to be planted would produce no fruit (thus failing to fulfill its very purpose); the children of God owe their very life to the Son (the seed) who was willing to be planted in order to bear fruit for the kingdom. "Loving life" is a self-defeating process in that such love destroys the very life it seeks to retain. "Hate" is used because it is the antithesis of love. Compared to the priority we place on the interests of the kingdom, our sentiment for the affairs of the world is nothing less than "hate."

The natural outcome of our passion for the kingdom is our service and undying devotion to the Christ. We must, however, not miss the message: in this context, to be "where the Lord is" is to be at the place of the Lord's passion, his suffering. Any man with full devotion to the kingdom, however, will be honored by the Father whom the Son serves.

A Troubled Soul, but a Glorified God (12:27-28)

Although John's Gospel emphasizes the divinity of Jesus more than the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Jesus is, nonetheless, still presented as fully human—he came in flesh. Therefore, we should not be surprised that when Jesus thinks about “the hour,” the cross, he recoils with a troubled heart. Some commentators have compared this verse in John to the Gethsemane account found in the other Gospels—it is here that Jesus agonizes over the suffering of the cross. Jesus, however, will not ask his Father to save him from “this hour” because it is for this very reason he has come. This hour must both be faced and passed through.

In all of his humanness, Jesus is shrinking away from the pain of crucifixion. But this agony ends like the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not what I will, but what You will” (Mark 14:36). “This hour” in the Gospel of John has an absolute air of inevitability. The Son has come to glorify the Father. When Jesus prays that his Father will be glorified, he uses the tense in the Greek language (aorist) which is a reflection of a single act. The single act which most glorifies the Father is Jesus' obedience on the cross. As a response to Jesus' prayer to glorify the Father, a heavenly voice declares, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again.”

A Thundering Voice from Heaven (12:29-30)

As is often the case when a divine voice speaks from heaven, the reception from the people below is varied. Some simply heard thunder, while others heard the voice of an angel. This confusing occasion reminds us of the various responses to the heavenly voice that spoke to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:7; 22:9). On that occasion, Saul both heard and understood the divine voice of the resurrected Jesus. Some with Paul, however, heard the voice, but did not have a visual experience of a glorified Christ. Still others, it seems, heard a voice, but did not understand the voice which was speaking to Paul.

The people who could not comprehend the “Word” when he arrived in the flesh (1:14) could also not comprehend the voice of God as it thundered from heaven. Verse 30, nonetheless, makes clear that the voice was primarily for the people, the crowds. Jesus was already aware of his intimate relationship to the Father. The crowd could hear the thunderous voice as confirming the mission of the Son of God.

Judgment upon the World (12:31-33)

Jesus' crucifixion represents the condemnation of the world in that the world has mistreated the Son. Likewise, the prince of this world—Satan himself—is ultimately overthrown by the crucifixion. Paradoxically, the very thing (the cross) that looked like the triumph of both evil men and the prince of evil turned out to be their demise. Satan is “cast out,” an indication that he will find himself cast into outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Jesus concludes by saying, “If I (emphatic in the Greek text, “I myself”) am lifted up, all men will be drawn to Me” (12:32). This “lifting up” always refers to the cross (see 3:14). In this very passage where we have “Greeks seeking Jesus,” we learn that the narrow, nationalistic religion of Judaism exists for the salvation of “all men.” By the nature of his death, “all men,” and not Jews alone, will be drawn by God to the Christ.

The cross, therefore, is the fork in the road. By the cross, men find their place of salvation or their place of judgment (see John 3:18). The cross is seen as both the enthronement of Christ and the dethronement of the devil from his tyranny over men.

The “lifting up of Jesus” has already been mentioned twice by John. In John 3:14, we read, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Again, in 8:28, we read, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

This lifting up, therefore, means more than simply being hoisted on a cross six feet above the ground. There is, unmistakably, a rich double meaning. He is both lifted up on the cross, but, ironically, that is the place of his great enthronement, for it is here that he both glorifies the Father and defeats the powers of darkness.

The people are shocked. The Messiah is not supposed to be someone who hangs upon a tree. By definition, the Messiah is a victorious warrior who overcomes Israel’s enemies and will never find himself defeated and dangling on a cross. The people are quite sure that scripture teaches certain things about the Christ, and that in no way includes (in their interpretation) any notion that he could be crucified! Perhaps they have in mind Old Testament passages that indicate the Christ would abide forever (Psalm 89:36; 110:4; Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 7:14). To be sure, the crowd understands that “lifting up” is a direct reference to death and that “the Son of Man” is a direct reference to the Christ. Just preceding our focal passage, John reported the Triumphal Entry, where they rejoiced that the Messiah had finally arrived to fulfill popular expectations. How could he possibly be now speaking of his own demise? Who is this Son of Man? Perhaps he is not the Messiah after all.

For a Little While (12:35-37)

New Testament scholar Edward Klink concludes, “The paradox that the Christ must suffer puts an end to their welcome of Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews.” Jesus responds by indicating that “the Light” will, indeed, only be with them for a little while and then will be taken away by the cross. If they would chose to walk in the Light as long as they have the Light, then when darkness arrives it will not overpower them.

The alternative is devastating: The man who walks in darkness does not know where he is going. It will not be any easier to place trust in Jesus after the cross. The crowd should, therefore, commit themselves to him now, before he, the Light of the world, is taken from them and they find themselves in total darkness.

As Jesus hides himself from them (v. 36b), we have an indication that his public ministry is coming to a close. His very act of hiding serves as a pronounced judgment on the crowds who refuse to see the light or comprehend voices from heaven. The people who do not believe in the signs (v. 37) are not believing in God himself. The Christ has been in their midst. He is about to be “lifted up,” but they will miss both the Messiah and his message because they will not see the irony of the cross—a display of both the glory and power of God.

Conclusion

The Greeks seek Jesus, and “the hour” of our Lord has arrived. He will be “lifted up” and all men—both Jews and Greeks—will be drawn to him. In his crucifixion, the Father is glorified and Satan is defeated!

ALTERNATIVE OUTLINE

John’s Comments on the Cross

1. The cross is Jesus’ glorification, despite being a place of shame (12:23).
2. The cross creates life from death (12:24). God most often saves his people through death, not from death.
3. The cross calls us to join our Christ in suffering (12:25-26).
4. The cross causes a troubled heart for Jesus (12:27, cf. 1:14, flesh dwelt among us).
5. The cross represents ultimate obedience by the Son (12:27-28), thus glorifying God.
6. The cross means judgment on the world and the prince of this world (12:31). Christ is enthroned ,and the devil is dethroned.
7. The cross invites ALL people to God’s grace (12:32; cf. 3:16).