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John 12:27-36

Thirty-ninth Message

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HARD WORDS FOR HARD HEARTS

When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, five days before Passover, he was acclaimed as the Messianic King. Messianic anticipation had reached new heights in the city. So much did the people want the kingdom of God to come, they could taste it. But Jesus refused to be drawn into the crowd's enthusiasm. In a startling development, the interest of some Greeks signaled the hour for which Jesus came – the hour of his death and glorification.

In chapter 12 of his gospel John now records some final words that Jesus had for Israel prior to his withdrawal. In reality, these last words bring to an end Israel's distinctiveness, which began with the patriarchs and Moses. They also bring an end to Jesus' public ministry in this gospel. Jesus' words are comforting at times, but they can be disturbing and unsettling on occasion, forcing a crisis of faith.

In the second half of chapter 12 we encounter several themes which are recurring ideas in John's gospel. Today we will look at two of these. Beginning in verse 27, we come now to the account of the Son's obedience and the Father's sovereignty.

“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. Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” So the crowd of people who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. (John 12:27-30 NASB)

The next scene in John's story is a prayer uttered by Jesus. Perhaps this is John's counterpart of the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, since it seems similar in content. Jesus knows he is going to die. The hour has come when he will be sown into the ground like a grain of wheat. But in his humanity he still has to face the reality of his death. His soul is troubled. This is the same emotion he felt in chapter 11 when he was grief stricken over the death of Lazarus. The phrase “save me from this

hour” might well be a request not a question, similar to Gethsemane's “take this cup from me.”

Jesus was feeling the tension of his impending death and his desire to obey the father. Death is the visible sign of God's judgment on sin. Jesus was aware of how serious and costly it was for him to give up his life, but he recognizes that this “hour” was the reason for his coming into the world. He came to give his life for others, and so his prayer becomes, “Father, glorify your name.” Here we see the obedience of the Son, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2). Jesus was willing to trust in God's sovereignty for his life.

God answers his son's prayer: “I have glorified it” (through Jesus' signs and earthly ministry, including the raising of Lazarus), and “will glorify” (through the death and exaltation of Jesus). The crowd is confused. Some think the voice is thunder; others think that an angel spoke to Jesus. The voice should have alerted people to the fact that something of tremendous significance was going to happen. Jesus tells the crowd that the voice did not come for him, but for their benefit. The memory of that voice would be an important benefit for the disciples and the crowd following the cross and Jesus' exaltation. This would mark a victory, not a defeat.

But I can also imagine that Jesus was comforted and assured by his Father's voice. He would have recalled hearing that voice on two other occasions – at his baptism and the transfiguration – the voice that referred to him as “his beloved Son.” Jesus asks us to follow him into death, to take up our crosses daily. When he asks us to lay down our life, our soul too can become agitated and troubled. We fight death, fight letting go of our life; we petition God to save us from suffering and pain. And yet the disciple of Jesus is willing to submit in obedience to the Father in order to glorify him. We glorify the Father when we seek his will. This is why we pray, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”

And often when we submit in the face of death itself God gives to us his reassuring voice: “You are my son, my daughter. I will be with you as I was with my son. I

will see you through. You can trust me.” This is the voice that we need to hear when life takes a devastating turn. If you ever hear God’s voice, take notes and write it down. It will benefit you in the years to come, and it also may be used to benefit others. Last spring when my wife and I were on vacation, we had just received some troubling news, so I went off one morning to read by myself. God spoke to me. He told me it was going to be tough, but it was going to be the best year of our life. I needed to hear that and believe that God had higher plans and purposes than I had for myself.

This raises for us a very important question: What is the goal of our life? Our goal is the same goal that Jesus had – to glorify the Father through our life and death. The first question of the “Westminster Shorter Catechism” asks: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer is: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.” This is the purpose for which God saved us.

The word “glory” is a prominent and significant term in John’s gospel, occurring over forty times. We will encounter this word a lot in the passion of Jesus. But here are a couple of key verses: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? (5:44). “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him” (7:18).

The goal is not that we be blessed, even though we are blessed. The goal is not for God to glorify us, even though he will. Our goal right now is to bless and glorify the Father, to prepare our hearts to worship him forever. As Paul says in Ephesians, all of our blessings in Christ are to the praise of his glory (1:6, 12, 14). Our life is not about us. We are not our own; we are bought with a price. We get confused about this goal, especially in our Western Christianity as we hear it said that God should deal kindly with us. The early church did not have this problem; they expected to die for the sake of Jesus to bear testimony to him.

There are two errors we need to avoid. First, when difficulties arise, we become deeply troubled in our soul. We pray like Jesus prayed. We ask to be saved from this hour and for the cup to be taken away. We pray as David prayed. We pour out our pain honestly before God. We lament our troubles, beseeching God not to abandon us, asking to be delivered from our enemies. However, through our prayers we are to become convinced of God’s goodness and faithfulness. We recognize that God might have higher plans for us than we have for ourselves. We

submit to those plans and trust that he can be glorified through whatever happens.

The second error is to move too quickly to the end of the prayer – for God to be glorified. Many Christians fall into this category. They avoid and deny the pain and move quickly, proclaiming with smiles on their faces, “God will be glorified.” When people are not honest with their troubled feelings, they become disconnected emotionally from God and close the door that would allow God to do deep healing in their life. We do not live in our pain and neither do we deny it. We move through it and become confident that God can use everything in our life to glorify his name and not ours.

The second theme we encounter in our text is salvation and judgment, light and darkness.

“Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die. The crowd then answered Him, “We have heard out of the Law that the Christ is to remain forever; and how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?” So Jesus said to them, “For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. (John 12:31-36)

The “hour” of Jesus’ death and glorification signals many things. It signals the hour of judgment for the world. The “world” is all of human society in rebellion against God. The world thinks it is passing judgment on Jesus, but the cross passes judgment on it.

The hour of Jesus’ death and glorification is the time when the ruler of this world is cast out (John 14:30, 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2, 6:12). When Jesus is enthroned, Satan is dethroned; the victory of God is complete. This is what Adam should have done in the garden – cast out the serpent. But this is what the second Adam did at the cross through his obedience to the Father.

The hour of Jesus’ death means that Jesus is lifted up. This is probably a reference to Isa 52:13: “Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.” Jesus’ death is a lifting up on the cross rather than a stoning. But this seeming defeat is what exalts him

and glorifies the Father, because it is there that God's wisdom and power is manifested (John 3:14, 8:28).

The hour of Jesus means that Jesus will draw all men to himself – all men without distinction, not all men without exception. The nations are in Jerusalem for Passover. The Greeks want to see Jesus. They can now come to God through Jesus. No longer will they have to stay in the court of the Gentiles; they can enter the holy of holies.

The hour of Jesus forces a division between light and darkness, just like God did on the first day of creation. Once again Jesus uses this metaphor so prevalent in John's writings (1:4-9, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:1). Jesus is the light shining in the darkness, the true light coming into the world, and the light of the world. But men love the darkness rather than the light because they do not want their deeds exposed.

Jesus tells the crowd that the light is with them for a little while, and exhorts them to walk in the light, i.e. to believe. If they don't believe, the darkness will overtake and master them. The motivation is that the man who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. He can't find his way. Meaninglessness is once more in control. In the dark, nothingness reigns. Satan has power when we want to live in the world because we walk in the darkness of unbelief.

But if the crowd walks in the light, then when the darkness comes, it will not overpower them. When we are obedient to God, then the prince of this world is cast out and loses his power. When we make a choice to not love our own lives, and choose the rule of the Father over our own life, then Satan is defeated and we have freedom. Life is meaningful and purposeful. Life makes sense. If we walk in the light, we become sons of light and reflect the characteristics of the true light (1 Thess 5:5; Eph 5:8).

The crowd misunderstands what Jesus is saying regarding the Son of Man being lifted up. They rightly connect the term Son of Man with the Messiah; however, the Jews expected that when the Messiah or Son of Man came, he would live forever and reign eternally (Isa 9:7; Ezek 37:25; Psa 72:17, 89:37) What Jesus is talking about doesn't match expectations. Therefore the people ask, "Who is this Son of Man who will be lifted up?" What kind of Son of Man does Jesus have in mind? The crowd thinks that Jesus is ill informed.

Jesus doesn't really answer their question. He wants his audience to believe. It will not be any easier after the cross. They should commit themselves now, before the light of the world is taken from them and they find themselves in

darkness. Jesus wants us to believe. He wants us to walk in the light and be sons of light. Lesslie Newbigin wrote: "The light has come into the world. You cannot postpone your recognition of it until all the theological problems have been solved."¹

The cross forces a crisis for every person. We can't have God without Jesus or without the cross. We can't have salvation without the recognition of evil, judgment and sin. We can't have light without the recognition of darkness. We are forced to make a choice.

Years ago I had a conversation with man of a certain religious persuasion. He was very much interested in spiritual things, but he denied the reality of sin and judgment. Finally I asked him why was the cross necessary. Why did Jesus have to be lifted up on a cross? His response was that the cross was merely an example for us so that we could be assured of passing from death to glory. This is not what Jesus says. He wants us to make a choice, to submit our lives to God before the darkness overtakes us.

These were hard words for the Jews. They are hard words for people who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But they can also be hard words for us as the people of God. The Jewish expectations for God and his Messiah made them blind to the presence of God right in their midst. And that can happen to us. We are so set in our expectations for God that we miss him. We are so confident in our understanding of his plans and purposes that we cannot adjust when God himself throws us a curve. Again, quoting Newbigin: "One must not use the promises of God as a shield against the actual presence of God. A proper confidence in the ancient promises of God must not become an improper and eventually fatal barrier against recognizing and rejoicing in the action of God now."²

Have ever had the experience of getting into your car or perhaps lying on your bed at night and suddenly realizing that God had just shown up and you had missed him? You had been so preoccupied with your agenda and ministry for God that you didn't see him. You had been thinking of the things you were doing and things you had to do. You were thinking of the people you love, the ones you needed to call and the ones you didn't want to call. You were blind to the opportunity to enter into the presence of God and his desire to use you in some way.

This is the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and it is our story, too. Jesus himself walks with us, just as he walked with the two disciples, but our eyes fail to recognize him. Listen to these words of Frederick

Buechner: “I think those eyes are almost the most haunting part of the whole haunting story because they remind me so much of my own eyes and because I suspect they may remind you also of yours. How extraordinary to have eyes like that – eyes that look out at this world we live in but, more often than not, see everything except what matters most. ... Much of the time I might as well be walking in the dark or sitting at home with my eyes closed, those eyes that keep me from recognizing what is happening around me.”³

Our false expectations for God and his work in our lives can cause us to walk in darkness. When we live in darkness we can't see. We don't know where we are going. Life seems to be made up of a random set of events that we are desperately trying to make fit into our view of life and God. “Our eyes are too accustomed to darkness and our faith not strong enough to believe in the reality of light even if it were to blaze up before us.”⁴

Jesus says that the light is here. Believe in the light, walk in the light, and become sons of light. Believe that he is present and working. Believe that Satan and darkness have been overcome. Believe that the woman you fed or the man you clothed or the stranger you welcomed might have been Jesus. Believe that despite all the craziness and ugliness of this dark world that Jesus is alive, and that he “offers us a new hope, a new vision of light that not even the dark world can overcome.”⁵

This text raises some important questions to reflect on. Is the goal of our life to glorify God? Do our expectations of God keep us from experiencing his presence? Oftentimes our goals are determined by our expectations. Our lives are to be lived in the spotlight of God's presence, in the light of Jesus, in order to glorify the Father.

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY. (1 Pet 2:9-10 NAS95S)

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 161.

² Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 161.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 254-255.

⁴ Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 256.

⁵ Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 257.