

Love's Last Appeal

John 12:23-50

Call: 52:13 (ESV), 53:4-5, 11 (NLT)
Scripture: Phil 2:5-11 (NLT)

I. Intro

Good morning! We return to our studies in the book of John today.

I don't know about you but I love the Lord of the Rings. When I was a youth pastor, I think I showed a clip from those movies every week! And, I know you purists stick to the books, and not the movies, and I understand that. But, if you're a purist or not, do you remember in the first book when the group with Frodo is trapped by Balrog, the mighty lord of the abyss, deep in the heart of the mountains. And, only Gandalf, the wizard, is able to stand up to this evil thing. Tolkien writes, "Balrog stepped forward slowly onto the bridge, and suddenly it drew itself up to a great height and its wings were spread from wall to wall; but still Gandalf could be seen, glimmering in the gloom; he seemed small, and altogether alone: grey and bent, like a wizened tree before the onset of a storm" (Fellowship, 345). In the ensuing battle, Gandalf defeats Balrog. But as the bridge cracks and Balrog begins to fall, his whip catches hold of Gandalf's leg and pulls him down with him into the abyss. Gandalf battles this terrifying foe, and he dies so others may live.

That sounds like another story doesn't it? In our text today from John, Jesus will say this about himself, but he says it like this: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Review

Two weeks ago, we saw Jesus enter Jerusalem, the text we associate with Palm Sunday. Jesus publicly claims kingship but in an upside-down way. He rides in on a donkey demonstrating his humility, gentleness and desire for peace. That text ended with some Greeks arriving and saying they wish to see Jesus. As I said then, I don't think they want to physically see Jesus. To "see" in John is more about understanding and believing, than about physically seeing. Today we hear Jesus' response to their request. This will be his final public appeal for belief in him. This is love's last appeal, summarized best by the phrase, "a grain of wheat" (John 12:24).

Our text today has three parts but is a very dense text. Unfortunately, we won't have time to explore every dimension of this text, so I've organized this sermon around these six words or phrases:

1. Lifted up
2. Glory
3. Hour
4. Grain of wheat
5. Isaiah

6. Belief

II. The Nature of Jesus' Kingship (23-36a)

23 And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

27 "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29 The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. 34 So the crowd answered him, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" 35 So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." (ESV)

A. The Introduction

In this initial section, Jesus explains the nature of his kingship, and that nature is essentially defined through the first four words/phrases. So, I want to walk through them now and draw out some implications.

B. Lifted Up

First of all, lifted up. The Greeks had asked how best to see Jesus? Jesus responds that all people will see him the best when he is lifted up. This phrase has been used throughout the Gospel beginning in chapter 3 with Nicodemus. There, Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. The reference to Moses and snakes refers back to a curious scene in the Old Testament in Numbers, where snakes attacked the Israelites in the wilderness. The people cry out to Moses, and God tells Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole in the midst of the people. If anyone who is bitten looks up at the snake and believes they will be healed, they will live.

So, Jesus, by using this phrase, is saying that when he is attached to a pole and lifted up in the midst of the people, they can look on him in belief and live. He, of course, is speaking to his death on the cross. This king will be lifted up on a cross, not a throne. This is the grand irony of the Gospel (Klink, 551), which is why the crowd asks questions. They can't imagine a Messiah lifted up on a pole! In their minds, the Messiah would never die. They don't understand.

And, Jesus says that when he is lifted up all people will be drawn to him. Yes, we proclaim the resurrection, yes we proclaim the mighty deeds, yes we proclaim the Sermon on the Mount and his mighty teaching, but in the end, we proclaim Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23). Why? Because this is where we see the nature of Jesus' kingship best. This is where we see the love of God the best, with his arms opened wide to draw all people. This is why the cross is such a powerful symbol, because it is a symbol of "the supreme enactment of God's love," as Richard Bauckham says (Bauckham, 73). This is the magnetic nature of the cross! As a boy, I remember the cross drawing me. I knew, even at that time, how unworthy I was and yet this God loved me that much.

C. Glory

Secondly, glory. Glory is another key word in John. It can mean visible splendor, but it can also refer to the character of someone or something. In this case, glory is about what makes someone or something what they are.

Here, God the Father says that Jesus has glorified his name and will glorify it again. Name is a way of saying reputation. Glory is about character; name is about reputation. When has the Father revealed his character and reputation in this Gospel? At least in the mighty works that Jesus has done. Those are the works the Father had given him to do, and Jesus obediently did them. So, in Jesus' deeds of mercy and restoration, Jesus has already revealed the character and reputation of his Father. Turning water into wine, healing the lame man, feeding the 5000 and raising Lazarus, to name a few, have already manifested the character and reputation of His Father. Jesus' Father is a God who shows mercy, who makes things new and who brings life out of death. The living God is a good God.

And, yet, there is more glory coming? More glory than the raising of Lazarus? Yes. There's an even greater manifestation of the glory of God than the raising of Lazarus. That brings us to the next term: hour.

D. Hour

Jesus' hour has finally come. Since the beginning of the Gospel, John has been telling us that Jesus' hour has *not yet* come. Now, finally, Jesus says his hour has come. What is the hour which has come? The hour of his crucifixion.

But Jesus is troubled, as he was outside the grave of Lazarus (11:33). And he questions God, verse 27. "*Father, save me from this hour?*" (12:27). The other Gospels record Jesus' turmoil within the Garden of Gethsemane. John records it here. Jesus then answers his own question in confidence. No, this is the very purpose for why he has come to this hour. In other words, not my will, but yours be done Father.

The hour is finally here. This hour will be the supreme moment of glorification according to John. Jesus' hour of death on the cross will be the supreme moment of revelation of the character and reputation of the living God. This is why John Calvin calls the final week of Jesus' life "The Theatre of Glory." Calvin writes, "For in the hour of the cross as in a splendid theatre,

the incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world. The glory of God shines indeed in creation on high and below, but never more brightly than in the cross. If it be objected that nothing could be less glorious than the cross, I reply that in this death we see boundless glory”— and I would add, we see boundless love (Calvin, 68).

Which brings us to the fourth phrase: “a grain of wheat.”

E. Grain of Wheat

Verse 24: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In order for a grain of wheat to be effective – in order for a grain of wheat to do what it is intended to do, it must die; otherwise, it remains alone, meaning it remains a grain of wheat. But, the purpose of a grain of wheat is the production of more wheat, not to remain alone. In order to produce more fruit, it *must* die.

As Jesus will say later, he only does what he sees his father doing. The father has exemplified perfect, self-giving love throughout the ages, not only to Jesus, but to all his creation. His father, the living God, has existed in self-giving love for all eternity. That’s what the trinitarian God is all about, perfect, self-giving love flowing between all three persons. And, Jesus wants to reveal it to the world. This is why he came. This is the very center of his kingship. This is what makes him tick. He is all about self-giving love to all people. As a grain of wheat, he will die so others may live.

F. To Be a Grain

But, here in John, Jesus doesn’t stop there. He expands his teaching from kingship to kingdom, Verses 25-26. And, it’s a word for all of us. To follow Jesus is actually to follow him in giving up our lives. The grain of wheat is the foundational principle not only for himself, but for his followers as well. This is how we participate in his kingdom. This is how we participate in God’s Work, our family value here at PBCC. We participate as a grain of wheat. We also live by dying like a grain of wheat.

Which means we miss the mark if we cling and grasp for power. We miss the mark if we cling and grasp for power that lords it over others. We miss the mark if we are self-focused, clinging and grasping to exalt ourselves. Why? Because we are made in the image of the grain-of-wheat God! Grasp for our careers, cling to our individual rights, protect our agendas, insist on my way or the highway, and we violate who were created to be. Clinging and grasping are profoundly un-glorious, profoundly un-image-like, profoundly un-grain-of-wheat-like, profoundly un-loving.

But if we die to self and give our lives away in self-giving love, we become grain-of-wheat people, reflecting the grain-of-wheat God, revealed in Jesus. This means we are most fully human when we imitate him and his character. May our prayer this week be: May we live as royally as you King Jesus, as a grain of wheat.

G. The Promise

But, Jesus also adds two great promises here. The other Gospels, if you are familiar with them, say similar things, like deny yourself, take up your cross, become a servant, etc, but Jesus here connects his statement with two great promises, verse 26. Jesus promises (1) where he is, his followers will also be, and (2) the Father will honor his followers. What good news! We will be with Jesus the Son, honored by God, the Father forever!

III. The Roots of Jesus' Kingship (36b-43)

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. 37 Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, 38 so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*"Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"*

39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

*40 "He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them."*

41 Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. 42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (ESV)

A. Introduction

What John is doing here is wrestling with the failure of the Jews to believe in their Messiah, in Jesus. It seems this was a hot topic for the early church, because Paul wrestles with the same thing in Romans 9-11, what the men have been studying this fall. John had prepared us for this in his prologue when he said, *"He [Jesus] came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"* (John 1:11).

B. Isaiah 6

And, now, after 12 chapters of his own people not receiving Jesus, John goes to Isaiah to interpret this response. He specifically goes to Isaiah 6:10, in verses 39-40. This Isaiah verse is actually quoted in all four Gospels, Acts and Romans.

John quotes from Isaiah here because what is happening in John's day is exactly what had happened in Isaiah's day.

- For example, Isaiah was concerned with light and darkness, especially, how Israel could become a light to the nations. Of course, John's Jesus answers those concerns. Jesus is the light of the world *who* draws the nations. After all, the Greeks just showed up didn't they? The nations are coming to see the light of the world.

- But, also, in Isaiah, the major problem is that Israel's leaders think they know better than God. Throughout Isaiah, Israel's leaders just know that God isn't wise enough to lead them. They just know God isn't acting the way he should.

And, isn't this exactly what is happening in John? The religious authorities just know God doesn't act like Jesus is acting. They won't let God be God because they think they know better. This is why Paul will go onto say, *"Knowledge puffs up. But love builds up"* (1 Cor 8:1).

Last week at the men's retreat, Mark Mitchell, our speaker, went through the book of Jonah. If you remember, Jonah is the one who God told "a whale to swallow without chewing" (Mitchell). Throughout the story, Jonah doesn't want to let God be God. Jonah knew God well. He even quotes God's self-revelation back to God, saying, *"I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity"* (Jonah 4:3). That's God's self-revelation! Jonah knew God really well, and where did it lead him? It led him to a life filled with hatred. He hated the Assyrians, even more after they repented. Jonah was self-righteous, filled with hatred. Isn't that what the religious authorities have demonstrated throughout John? Remember the lame man? Remember the blind man? Remember the decision to kill Jesus and Lazarus. They are self-righteous, filled with hatred.

But, we should not so easily dismiss these religious authorities, because this can easily slip into our thinking as well, especially at a Bible-believing church like ours. Just this week, I had a friend tell me how they did ministry at their church, and my first thought was – well that isn't how you do it! Ugh. I had to repent. How easily it is to become self-righteous!

And, Mark made the point that the aim of our knowledge is to lead us to grow in love, love of God and love of others. In other words, the aim of our knowledge is to lead us to become like a grain of wheat.

C. Isaiah 53

John then goes to Isaiah 53. Isaiah knew that God would save in an unexpected and stunning way through a suffering servant. John quotes Isaiah 53:1, saying, *"Who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"*

D. The Suffering Servant

You may know Isaiah 53. Verse 5 is the famous verse, which we read in our call to worship today, *"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."* But this servant song actually begins with this, *"See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted"* (Isa 52:13), the same word used here in John! Isn't that cool!

God had revealed his mighty arm in the Exodus all those years ago when God delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh. Pharaoh had been known as the “lord of the mighty arm,” until the true and living God displayed his mighty arm. And, now in John’s time, God’s mighty arm had been revealed again through Jesus and through his mighty deeds, especially the raising of Lazarus.

But there is one more mighty deed to come, the resurrection, but only after Isaiah’s servant is lifted up. Only after this servant will be crushed for his enemies. Only after this servant will bear the punishment of his enemies. And because of this, later in Isaiah 53, as we also read in the call, “This servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all our sins” (Isa 53:11). This is the upside-down wisdom of this king and his kingdom. This is what CS Lewis in the Narnia series calls, “The deeper magic.” This is the grain-of-wheat God. Jesus will die that we may live.

IV. The Final Appeal (44-50)

44 And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. 45 And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. 46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. 47 If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. 48 The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” (ESV)

A. Introduction

Here is Jesus’ final public appeal, an appeal to belief in him. John doesn’t tell us where or when Jesus says these words; so, it can be thought of as a final appeal to the entire world. Even the fact that he “cries out” in a loud voice, serves to direct his words to everyone everywhere. And, what he says is a culmination of all he has said and done throughout these first 12 chapters. Indeed, these words seem to bring some urgency to belief in him.

B. The Unity of the Trinity

And, if we do come and see and believe, who are we believing in? In him of course, but by believing Jesus, we are also believing the Father. He and the Father are one. Jesus is God’s autobiography. In the prologue, John told us that Jesus was revealing the living God. And, for twelve chapters, he has done it. The character and reputation of the living God has been revealed through Jesus. And, how best to describe it? As a grain of wheat. He dies that we may live and live eternally with Jesus the Son, honored by God, the Father!

V. Conclusion

The Greeks showed up, and they wanted to see Jesus. They didn’t want to simply see him with their eyes. They wanted to know his character. They wanted to understand what he was all

about. They wanted to know what really made him tick. And, what does Jesus say, “What makes me tick is what makes my Father tick. And, what is that? It is to be a grain of wheat. *‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’* What makes me tick,” Jesus says, “is for me to die so you may live.”

We’re going to have a time of reflection now while the worship team sings. And, I want to invite you to imagine you are there that day with those Greeks, and you have a front row seat. And, Jesus looks at you, and he looks you in the eyes. And he says, “Like a grain of wheat, I will die so you will live.” Amen.

VI. Benediction

Receive this benediction

Go now in the love of the grain-of-wheat God,
 in the life of the rising grain-of-wheat God,
 in the power of the reigning grain-of-wheat God,
 and in the glory of the coming grain-of-wheat God.

Resources

Bauckham, Richard, *Gospel of Glory*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Calvin, John, *The Gospel According to St. John: Part II (11-21) and the First Epistle of John*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Tolkien, J.R.R., *Fellowship of the Ring*