

The Hour of Glory

John 12:20-26

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First Presbyterian Church, Coral Springs/Margate, FL, April 15, 2007

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (Jn. 12:23).

In his sermon on this passage, James Montgomery Boice reflected on the various pulpits in which he preached in his many travels. He points out that while from the front pulpits are often quite beautiful and ornate, on the preacher's side they are often less glamorous. There are wires to trip on, buttons to push, books stacked up, and even fans or heaters. Sometimes there are signs that say, "When the light come on you have two minutes!" But there is one pulpit he particularly enjoyed preaching from because of a sign pasted inside. It read, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Boice commented, "That is a good word for any preacher. I could wish that every preacher and teacher of the Word of God might have those words before him constantly as he prepares his messages and as he speaks them."¹

The Hour of Glory

The saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," comes from the passage we are now studying in John's Gospel. It was spoken by a group of unnamed Greeks who wished to meet the Lord. John tells us: "Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus" (Jn. 12:20-22).

There were many Greeks living in Palestine at this time, some of whom were proselytes to Judaism who came to Jerusalem for

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:934.

Passover. The region where Philip and Andrew grew up, Bethsaida in Galilee, was close to a large Greek population. So these Greeks may have been acquaintances. Still, it seems that Philip did not know how to respond to their request, so he consulted with Andrew. This is the third time we find Andrew bringing someone to Jesus. The first was his brother Simon Peter, to whom he said, “We have found the Messiah” (Jn. 1:41). The second was the boy whose few fish and loaves Jesus used to feed the hungry crowd (Jn. 6:8-9). Andrew’s exemplary reputation for bringing others to Jesus is confirmed here, for he took Philip to Jesus with news of the Greeks.

Jesus’ reply to this news was as remarkable as it was unexpected. “Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). He looked upon the arrival of these Greeks as “a sign that the climax of his mission had at last arrived.”²

First, Jesus declared, “The hour has come.” This is remarkable given earlier statements in John’s Gospel. During a wedding feast at the beginning of his ministry, his mother, Mary, wanted Jesus to reveal himself in glory. He replied, “My hour has not yet come” (Jn. 2:4). Later, at the Feast of Tabernacles, his brothers urged him to glorify himself by performing miracles. Jesus answered, “My time has not yet come” (Jn. 7:5). Later, the authorities failed to arrest him “because his hour had not yet come” (Jn. 8:20).

So why has the arrival of these Greeks caused Jesus to say, “The hour has come”? The answer recalls us to the building conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. The crisis is coming quickly, as orchestrated by Jesus himself. Now these representatives of the Gentile world appear asking for him, and Jesus sees that the decisive turning point of his mission in the world is at hand. For, as Peter would later preach, God intended for the gospel to go to “the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14). In the passage before ours, the Pharisees lamented, “Look, the world has gone after him” (Jn. 12:19). With typical irony, John reports the arrival of these Greeks to show that this was Jesus’ very intention: to gain his converts from the whole world. The coming of the Greeks signified that Jesus’ victory was at hand. “This was the point,” says Boice, “at

² Ibid., 3:935.

which literally the entire world, represented by these Greeks, was beginning to go after him.”³

Jesus adds to this a most striking description of what this hour entails: “The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). The term “Son of Man” comes from the vision of Daniel 7, which showed that “there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan. 7:13-14). This was a popular image among the Jews; their literature in the preceding centuries includes numerous references to the “Son of Man.” Jesus took this name for himself, especially when speaking about his Second Coming in glory (cf. Mt. 13:41, 16:27-28, 19:28, 24:27, 26:64; Jn. 5:27). But he also pointed out what the Jews had forgotten, that for the Son of Man to ascend, he first must descend (see Jn. 3:13). This is why Jesus so often used this name in association with his predictions about the cross (see Mt. 12:40, 17:12, 20:28, 26:2, 45, Jn. 3:14, 6:53).

So there is both drama and irony in Jesus’ exclamation: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” His Jewish hearers would imagine trumpets blowing and the marching of God’s people in world conquest. This was the glory they sought. But Jesus was referring to his coming cross. D. A. Carson comments, “Jesus’ death was itself the supreme manifestation of Jesus’ glory.”⁴ “Glorifying” always involves “revealing” or “displaying.” We glorify someone’s artwork by displaying it prominently. So what displays the true glory of the Son of Man? Jesus’ answer is his crucifixion: his atoning death for sin. All questions about the purpose, character, and glory of God were about to receive their answer. Not only was Daniel’s vision to receive its clearest explanation, but the whole Old Testament would be explained and fulfilled when Jesus took up the cross. What the world sees as the deepest humiliation, Jesus understood as his chief glory. As he put it on the night of his arrest, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31).

³ Ibid., 3: 936.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 437.

This is why there is no clearer distinction between the Christian and the unbeliever than their respective views of the cross. Paul wrote that to the Jews the cross was a “stumbling block,” and to the Gentiles “folly” (1 Cor. 1:23). But, the apostle continued, “to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks,” the cross is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). Charles Spurgeon writes:

Christ’s death is *his* glory and it ought also to be *ours*... To spiritual eyes, the Christ of God was never more glorious than when he was nailed to the cross of Calvary... A glory, never equaled, shone around the Conqueror of death and hell when he bowed his head, and said, ‘It is finished’.⁵

The Principle of Glory

John does not tell us if the Greeks ever met with Jesus. But whether Jesus’ response was made to them, to the disciples or before the crowds, he clearly wanted his hearers to understand what it means to come to him. Therefore, he amplified his meaning about his hour of glory with an example from nature: “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” (Jn. 12:24). Just as a seed must be buried in the ground and decay to give birth to a plant, the Son of Man is glorified and bears his fruit through his suffering in death.

Just taking this saying as a general principle, it makes an important point about life. John L. Girardeau identifies this as “a great and universal law in this world of sin – the law that sorrow is in order to joy, and death in order to life.”⁶ The way to really live is not to indulge yourself but to discipline yourself. The way to achieve things of value is to engage in self-denial. And unless there are things you will die for, then your life is really not worth living.

During his last visit to Northern Virginia, the great Christian general Robert E. Lee was approached by a young mother who asked him to bless her baby son. Lee held the baby and told the mother, “Teach him he must deny himself.”⁷ It was by applying that same principle to himself in Christian faith that Lee’s life made such a difference.

⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1978), 50.

⁶ John L. Girardeau, 2:172.

⁷ Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1934, reprint 1991), 588

Of course, the greatest example and fulfillment of this principle was the death Jesus was about to suffer. J. C. Ryle writes:

This sentence was primarily meant to teach the wondering Greeks the true nature of Messiah's kingdom... Our Lord would have them know that He came to carry a cross, and not to wear a crown. He came not to live a life of honour, ease, and magnificence, but to die a shameful and dishonoured death. The kingdom He came to set up was to begin with a crucifixion, and not with a coronation. Its glory was to take its rise not from victories won by the sword, and from accumulated treasures of gold and silver, but from the death of its King.⁸

It matters greatly that we understand Jesus' point, lest we should come to him under false pretenses. It was only by dying that Jesus became our Savior. Unless Jesus bore our sins on the cross, there would be no Christianity and no church; there is no Christianity where the cross is absent. We are not saved by following Jesus' example. Some people will say, "My Christianity is the imitation of Christ." Certainly, Christians are to follow Jesus' example, but one cannot become a Christian this way. The same is true of Jesus as a teacher. His teaching is the greatest ever heard, but we are not saved by living out what Jesus taught. Indeed, we are not able to. We especially see that this is true when we read in the Sermon on the Mount, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48).

Moreover, what Jesus really taught about salvation is that it depends on what only he could do, namely, his atoning death for our sin. Our true and greatest problem is not poor information or examples, but God's righteous condemnation of our sin. The issue is not how we can find God, but how the God we find can accept guilty sinners like us. For this reason, Jesus is glorified as our Savior when we confess our great need for his cross. Therefore, to deny or reject the cross is to deny Christ. To refuse to confess your sin and your need for Jesus' atoning blood is to refuse the only way of salvation he came to offer.

This is what Jesus wanted these Greeks to know. They were right to come to Jesus. But they must know that it is from his atoning death that eternal life comes to men and women. Like the seed that first is buried and dies, Jesus bears the fruit of his kingdom through the cross and the tomb in which his body was laid. And, having died for us,

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:376

Jesus has gained and is still gaining his fruit – a great harvest – to the praise of his grace. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes: “Because of His death, multitudes of every tongue and nation would come forth to eternal life in Him, as fruit. How true this has been as we survey the pages of church history. Wherever the message of Christ’s atoning death has gone, it has borne fruit in abundance. This is the very heart of the Christian gospel.”⁹

The Principle Applied to Us

But it is also true that those who are saved by faith in the cross must take up the cross for themselves. The principle of Jesus as Savior is also the principle for the salvation he gives. To make this point, Jesus continued: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn. 12:25).

What was true for Jesus is true for his followers. Jesus says that we are not to love our lives, but to hate our life in this world. We need to understand this rightly. Jesus is not saying that we should hate life itself, nor that we should not love the good things God has placed in this world. In this respect, it is helpful to note that Jesus uses two different Greek words for life. In the first clause, when Jesus tells us not to love our “life,” he uses the word *psuche*. This gives us our word *psychology*. Jesus means, therefore, that we are to reject the worldly way of thinking and feeling. We are to reject the life of ego. But then when Jesus speaks of gaining “eternal life,” he uses the word *zoe*. When joined to the word “eternal,” this refers to the divine life in us. So we are to turn from the former – worldly ego – to the latter, the divine life that enters us through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends.

A recent controversy has made clear the importance of Jesus’ teaching. The controversy concerned what has been called “lordship salvation.” The question is whether a Christian can have Jesus as Savior without receiving him as Lord. Sadly, a large number of theologians and church leaders answered in the affirmative. Some actually wrote that so long as one has believed in Jesus, even if they never showed any change in their lives and never turned away from

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1973), 155.

sin in the least, they could still be assured of heaven. To teach otherwise, they claimed, is legalistic. But those who emphasized “lordship salvation” were not teaching salvation by works. Rather, they were rightly teaching salvation *to* works. That is, they insisted on Jesus’ own teaching that to be a Christian requires that we turn from sin and the world to possess eternal life. This is the very point on which Jesus laid such stress in John 12:25.

How, then, should we understand what it means to turn from a worldly life and seek a heavenly one? Jesus’ point about the grain of wheat dying makes it clear that we are saved by trusting in Christ’s death for us. But this leads to a death that we also experience, which we should understand in at least two ways.

First, Christians must *die to self*. We experience a death to our own will as we surrender our lives to Jesus. We all have our ideas and desires for life. But Christians are called to surrender our plans to Jesus. Where Jesus would have us go, we go. What Jesus would have us do, we do. Especially, being a Christian means relinquishing worldly values and goals we have had, most of which center on money, success, fame, and pleasure. If you are a Christian and are still living for the things of the world, you will never prosper spiritually or be truly useful for Christ until you let them go.

One man who learned this lesson was George Mueller, who became famous in 19th century England for the great number of orphanages he built and maintained, all through the power of prayer. Mueller was once asked his secret. He replied: “There was a day when I died. Died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren or friends; and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”¹⁰ George Mueller showed us that to die to self is to lead a life of service to both God and man.

Secondly, the follower of Christ must *die to sin*. Paul wrote of this in Romans 6: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present

¹⁰ Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John*, 156.

yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness” (vv. 11-13). We die to sin by starving it and by presenting our lives to God. We offer our feet to take us into wholesome and holy places, not to places of sin. We offer our hands not to iniquity but to good works. We offer our lips no longer to gossip, slander, and coarse speech but to praising God, encouraging others, and spreading the gospel. We offer our eyes not to gaze in lust or envy but to glorify God. We offer our minds no longer to the ways of the world, but we fill it with the light of God’s Word.

This presents a great challenge. Joel Nederhood rightly assessed: “We are deeply in love with the world. We play the game of life according to the rules the world lays down. Sometimes we drink of the trough with which it satisfies its ordinary swine. We relish certain things that heaven despises.”¹¹ Since this accurately describes many Christians today, we ought to make this a matter of fervent prayer and serious application. Perhaps above all, we need to devote ourselves to a life of regular communion with God through the study of his Word, which alone can make us “wise for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15) and transform us through the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

On the day she was put to death for her faith in Christ, the teenage princess Lady Jane Grey sent her personal Bible to her sister Katherine, along with a note that included these words:

If you with good mind read it, and with an earnest desire follow it, no doubt [it] shall bring you to an immortal and everlasting life; it will teach you to live and learn you to die... my good sister, and more again let me entreat thee to learn to die; deny the world, defy the devil, and despise the flesh, and delight yourself only in the Lord... with whom even in death there is life.”¹²

The Path of Glory

Jesus has presented us with the principle of his glory, namely, that of his cross. He said that the time of his glory came as his cross approached. We might echo his words, since for us the time has now come for the Son of Man to be glorified in our lives, and, indeed,

¹¹ Joel Nederhood, *The Forever People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 113.

¹² Cited from John E. Marshall, *Life and Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 108-109.

that we might participate in that glory. With this in mind, Jesus concluded by laying out the path of glory for those who come to him in faith: “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” (Jn. 12:26).

First, Jesus said, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me.” This was his message for the Greeks who sought him. J. C. Ryle comments: “As the soldier follows his general, as the servant follows his master, as the scholar follows his teacher, as the sheep follows its shepherd, just so ought the professing Christian to follow Christ. Faith and obedience are the leading marks of real followers, and will always be seen in true believing Christians.”¹³ We follow Jesus in a life of cross-bearing self denial. We follow him in a life of service to God and man. We follow Jesus by holding fast the doctrines of his Word and pursuing a holy life through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Jesus stated: “And where I am, there will my servant be also.” This is not a command but a promise. This is our great reward and our pleasure in this life: to have Christ’s encouragement, to know Christ’s approval, and to live by Christ’s power. Christ is with every Christian; even when we stray, the Good Shepherd watches over us. But only those who are following Jesus are able to experience his presence. So we must ask ourselves, “Would I rather have pleasant circumstances without the presence of Christ? Or is it not instead true that the worst this world can give me is nothing compared with the surpassing greatness of living with Christ?” A. M. Hunter wrote, ““It has been said that *follow me* is the whole of a Christian’s duty, as to *be* where Christ is is the whole of his reward.”¹⁴

Especially, wherever Christ’s Spirit is present in the work of his kingdom, those who follow him will be there as well. And by following Jesus – coming to the cross and then carrying it – we have the incalculable blessing of knowing that Jesus has secured our own place there with him in heaven, where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

¹³ Ryle, *John*, 2:378.

¹⁴ Cited in Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 447.

Last, and greatest, Jesus promises, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” Much of our problem is that we do not aim high enough in life. We settle for earthly happiness, when Christ calls us to holiness. We settle for earthly success we were made and redeemed for heavenly glory. Boice writes, “Jesus tells us that God will honor those who follow him in this life. In this life his way often involves suffering. Sometimes it involves death for his sake. It always involves self-denial. But, says Christ, the suffering will be followed by honor and the self-denial by praise.”¹⁵

The Greeks said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Do you wish to see Jesus? If you do, realize that Jesus answers by showing you his cross, as he did the visiting Greeks. Is this the Jesus you expected? Do you still wish to see him, when he calls you to find glory in his death for your sins? Are you still willing to come, when Jesus calls you to deny yourself and follow him? You should, because to turn from the cross is to forfeit the only true Savior and therefore to forfeit your soul. If you come to Jesus, it will lead to your own death, but that death leads to everlasting and glorious life. And if we wish to show Jesus to others – if we want to make real to them the glory of his cross – the best way is for us to carry the cross, living out a life of death to self and sin, and of resurrection life to the glory of our Lord.

¹⁵ Boice, *John*, 3:944.