

Lifted Up

John 12:27-34

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“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn. 12:32).

The Christian faith involves a number of high mysteries. We think of the doctrine of the Trinity, which teaches that God exists in one being and three persons, and we realize that this is beyond our understanding. The same might be said about the incarnation of Christ and the inspiration of Holy Scripture. Both Jesus and the Bible are fully human: Jesus possessed a truly human nature and the Bible contains truly human documents. But they are also fully divine: Jesus possesses a truly divine nature and the Bible is the very revealed Word of God. How one can be both fully human and fully divine is a high mystery that we cannot understand.

These are all mysteries for the mind, but there are also mysteries for the heart. One is the question of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Jesus suffered not only at the hands of men but also at the hands of God. Can we ever appreciate the price Jesus paid to redeem us from our sins? Surely, we cannot. But in the Gospels we can gaze in wonder and adoration at Jesus’ own trepidation as he prepared to suffer and die for our sins. The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus’ anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me” (Lk. 22:42). John shows us Jesus’ anxiety earlier, after Jesus had seen the hour of his cross in the arrival of some Greeks to see him. He exclaimed, “Now is my soul troubled” (Jn. 12:27).

Jesus’ Soul Troubled

It may seem surprising at first that a man like Jesus would approach his death with such trembling of soul. After all, other men have approached their death tranquilly. Socrates was stoic as he drank his hemlock. History records many Christians facing even a tortuous death with calm repose. So why is Jesus' soul so troubled about the coming cross? Especially when we remember how much greater Jesus is than any other man, being the Son of God and Messiah, and when we remember his miraculous powers, we wonder why Jesus should say, "Now is my soul troubled."

The answer is that terrible though his physical sufferings were, by far the greatest part of Jesus' suffering on the cross was spiritual. A. W. Pink comments on Jesus' anguished soul: "And what occasioned this? The insults and sufferings which He was to receive at the hands of men? The wounding of His heel by the Serpent? No, indeed. It was the prospect of being 'made a curse for us,' of suffering the righteous wrath of a sin-hating God."¹ At the thought of this, all the Gospels tell us that Jesus began to tremble and have trouble in his soul. As other men feel their stomachs turning and their palms sweating before some dreadful ordeal, so also our Lord tremble as he contemplated the judgment of God that he would bear. William Hendriksen writes, "The realization of the inexpressibly dreadful character of his impending descent into hell shook the human soul of Jesus to its very depths."²

If Jesus' troubled spirit shows his solidarity with human suffering, his faithful resolve sets an example for us. "Now is my soul troubled," he prayed. "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (Jn. 12:27-28).

This shows that Jesus found the resolve needed not to shrink away from his ordeal. Where did he gain this resolve? His answer shows that he found strength in the will of GOD for him. It was the very purpose of his life to come to this hour of the cross. Indeed, submission to God's will had been the guiding principle of Jesus'

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 679.

² William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 200.

whole life. Now in the hour of his trial Jesus is fortified in his resolve by this same commitment.

When we think of God's will for Jesus, we think of him redeeming us from our sins. Undoubtedly, this motive gave Jesus strength. But Jesus points to an even higher motive: "Father, glorify your name." James Boice comments: "To glorify God is his chief end... He will not shrink from following whatever way the Father chooses to have the Son glorify him."³ The highest motive in our salvation is always that God should be glorified, and it was this desire that primarily strengthened Jesus' trembling soul before the cross. He literally loved God's glory more than his own soul, and thus he found strength to overcome the infinite suffering of the cross.

Jesus' prayer ends in the most striking way: "Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (Jn. 12:28). On previous occasions, God spoke from heaven in order to express his approval of Jesus. At Jesus' baptism, God's voice was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). God spoke similar words from heaven during Jesus' transfiguration on the mount (Mt. 17:5). In this case, God is also showing approval of Jesus, only now he says, "I have glorified [my name], and I will glorify it" (Jn. 12:28). Jesus' desire for God's name to be glorified in his life has already been gratified and it will be again in his cross.

God was glorified in Jesus' birth, which is why the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest" (Lk. 2:14). God was glorified in Jesus' perfect life; from earliest childhood he had perfectly kept God's law. God was glorified in Jesus' ministry. Jesus displayed the kingdom of God in his miracles, teaching, and life. But it would be especially at the cross that Jesus would glorify God, displaying the perfections of his attributes like justice, mercy, wisdom and love.

Jesus Lifted Up

When we think of works of glory, we tend to think of mankind's great achievements. The ancient world would probably have said that the most glorious achievement was the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. But those great gardens no longer exist and their

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:947.

glory has long since faded. Or we might think of military glory. Alexander the Great achieved colossal glory, yet for him it ended with his youthful death, after which his empire fragmented. A similar story might be said about the great Roman conquerors. In more recent times, we remember the glory of the war rallies staged by Adolf Hitler, which ended in the destruction of the German nation. Today, we attach glory to the exploits of sports stars, movie stars, or corporate titans, all of which glory is short lived. But when Jesus Christ sought to glorify his heavenly Father by his death on the cross, he attained a glory that will never end.

When the voice from heaven spoke to Jesus, what the crowd standing by heard was something like thunder. John says that some of them concluded that “an angel has spoken to him” (Jn. 12:29). But Jesus replied that the voice was intended not as a communication to him but to them. He explained, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out” (Jn. 12:31). This is one important way in which Jesus’ death would bring glory to God, by the judgment of this world and the casting out of Satan.

How does the cross of Christ judge the world? First, it shows the sinfulness of sin. Why, after all, did God’s perfect Son die in such cruel humiliation and, beyond that, suffer such terrible wrath from God? The answer is sin. J. C. Ryle writes:

Terribly black must that guilt be for which nothing but the blood of the Son of God could make satisfaction. Heavy must that weight of human sin be which made Jesus groan and sweat drops of blood in agony at Gethsemane and cry at Golgotha, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ (Mt. 27:46).⁺

The world writes off sin as only a small thing. Today, sin is excused as dysfunction, the inevitable result of poor environments. But the cross of Jesus exposes the world’s sin and in that way it judges the world.

Secondly, the world’s attitude towards Jesus is judged at the cross. Why, after all, was Jesus’ crucified? On the godward side, he was crucified as a judgment for our sin. But on the manward side, Jesus was being removed by a world that hated him. If you want to

⁺J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 6.

understand the world, consider what it did to Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life of truth and love, healing and teaching the people. So the world killed him. Therefore, Jesus said of his cross, “Now is the judgment of this world.”

But the cross not only judged the world, it also overthrew “the ruler of this world.” This refers to the devil. The irony is that the cross was Satan’s greatest triumph. The Messiah had been put to death by the will of his own people. But in the greatest reversal ever, Jesus instead overthrew Satan’s reign. Satan reigns through sin and he holds sway over men and women through the power of their guilt before God. But Jesus’ death removes our sin by paying the debt of our guilt. Moreover, when believers come to Christ for their forgiveness, Christ sends his Holy Spirit to deliver them from Satan’s power. Donald Grey Barnhouse notes: “When a person becomes a Christian, he is delivered from Satan’s grasp, and the chains of sin which had shackled him are instantly broken.”⁵ The cross secured not only the judgment of the world that rejected Jesus, but also the overthrow of his enemy, the devil.

But there is a more positive way in which the cross glorified God the Father: its power to draw sinners and restore them to God. Jesus continued: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn. 12:32).

This is one of the great verses on the power of the cross to save sinners. By saying, “when I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus is referring to the dreadful events of the cross that would take place in a few short days. Not only would that cross glorify God’s righteous judgment, but also his gracious power to draw men and women into fellowship with himself.

In this respect, the cross is the greatest display of God’s love to the world. The Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs writes: “Behold the infinite love of God to mankind and the love of Jesus Christ that, rather than God see the children of men to perish eternally, would send His Son to take our nature upon Him and thus suffer such dreadful things.

⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1973), 160.

Herein God shows His love... Oh, what a powerful, mighty, drawing, efficacious meditation this should be to us!”⁶

And yet the cross’s power does not consist only in the sentiments it inspires in our hearts. It should inspire our love to God, but because of our sin it does not. Instead, it is by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, which Christ secured by his obedience on the cross, that sinners are drawn to God. William Hendriksen comments: “By means of his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and coronation Jesus attracts to himself all of God’s elect, from every age, clime, and nation. He draws them by means of his Word and Spirit. This activity of the Spirit is the reward for the Son’s being lifted up.”⁷ As the Holy Spirit presses the cross of Christ upon our hearts, the prophecy of old is fulfilled: “I will pour out... a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him” (Zech. 12:10).

It is those who are born again by the Spirit’s ministry of God’s Word who are drawn to God by the cross. The lesson we learn of God’s love is seen in a story about a boy and his model sailboat. Longing for such a toy, the boy got a kit and spent weeks laboring to build it. When it finally was complete, he took it down to the lake. It sailed so beautifully that it kept going, right out of sight. Despite all his efforts, the boy could not find the boat. Several weeks later he was walking past a store window when to his amazement he saw the boat. Only it had an expensive price tag on it. He went in and explained to the shop-keeper, but the owner said, “I’m sorry, but I paid a great deal of money for this toy boat and I cannot give to you for free.” So the boy took up jobs and worked and worked until he finally had enough money to buy back his boat. Finally, he walked out of the store with his precious boat in his hand. And he said, “Now you are twice mine – once because I made you and once because I bought you.” So it is with God. He created us, and then when we were lost in sin he purchased us with the precious blood of Jesus. How wonderful is the love of God revealed in the cross of Christ!⁸

⁶ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, date), 353.

⁷ Hendriksen, *John*, 203.

⁸ Quoted from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 308.

Jesus' statement that "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," contains a wealth of truth concerning the gospel. First, it declares the necessity of faith in his atoning death for sin. This comes through in his reference to "all people." When Jesus says he will draw all people through his cross, he does not mean that he died for everyone's forgiveness. We know this because the Bible frequent insists that not all will be forgiven and saved. Jesus said that "whoever does not believe is condemned" (Jn. 3:18). When John's Gospel refers to "all people," he means all kinds of people, from all nations, races, and tongues. But note that Jesus says that their salvation will occur "when I am lifted up from the earth." Kent Hughes writes: "Christ was not saying that the whole world would be saved, but that all who will be saved will be saved by looking to and relying upon him. If you are not yet a believer, see his troubled soul as he became a curse for you, as he suffered separation from the Father, as he lovingly bore the penalty of your sins."⁹

Moreover, salvation happens as we are "drawn" to Jesus. The Greek word *elko* is used for the dragging of a heavy object. Earlier, Jesus taught that this drawing by God is absolutely necessary: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn. 6:44). So great is sin's power over us, that only if God extends his own people to draw us to himself can we be saved. This is why Jesus refers to those who come to him as those "that [the Father] has given me" (Jn. 6:39).

This should have a profound effect on our approach to evangelism. Jesus says he will draw people to himself, not drive them. The preaching of God's wrath and his law plays an important role in evangelism, since it is through the law that we learn of our sin and need for grace. Yet we should not seek to terrify people into converting. This is especially true of those who are burdened with the misery of a life in sin. We remember Jesus' treatment of the woman by the Samaritan well in John 4. His evangelism began with a human connection. He told her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10). Jesus did not skirt the subject of sin, but first he boldly offered her God's gift of

⁹ Ibid.

eternal life. It is especially the sweetness of Christ and the grace of his gospel that God uses to draw sinners to himself. James Boice writes, “The uplifted Christ draws sinful, ignorant, and rebellious men and women to him, conquering them by the unimaginable, unfathomable love that is so clearly displayed there.”¹⁰

Lastly, if Jesus will draw all people to himself through his cross, then let us preach his cross. It is true that many are offended by the Bible’s teaching of our need of an atonement for sin. But from that cross, as we proclaim it, Christ will draw many. This was the apostolic example in witnessing the gospel. Paul explained, “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

When Our Souls Are Troubled

In the coming of the Greeks to see him, Jesus had seen the hour of his cross. His soul was deeply troubled, but as he found his resolve by submitting to God’s will, we have seen the way God’s glory shines through the cross. Let me conclude by pointing out that we have a similar calling when we face the trials that trouble our souls. What do we do when circumstances seem to have turned against us? When a job is lost, or sickness has come, or a loved one is lost? The example of Jesus tells us what we should do as well.

First, we should remind ourselves of the anguish Jesus willingly endured for our sakes and what this says about our God. Ours is a Savior who willingly suffered unimaginable violence so that we might be saved. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

This was something the Jews of his day could not comprehend. Their idea of a Savior was only of one who conquers and reigns forever. This is why they asked, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:636.

up? Who is this Son of Man?" (Jn. 12:34). The Old Testament did indeed make great promises of the eternal reign of God's Messiah (see Isa. 9:7; 2 Sam. 7:12-13; Eze. 37:25). But they forgot the many other passages that showed that this Messiah must first suffer for his people. For instance, Isaiah prophesied the cross, saying that the Messiah "shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted." He then elaborated, "His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind... it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin," (Isa. 52:13-14; 53:10). Jesus was probably referring to this passage when he spoke of being "lifted up." The listening Jews had hoped for a different Messiah and a different salvation. "Who is this Son of Man?" they asked.

Christians should know better, and we should know better than to think that our salvation will keep us from carrying our own crosses. But we can look to Jesus lifted up for us, we can think of the suffering he endured for our salvation, and remember that in this way he secured an eternal salvation that will never fail us.

Secondly, when trouble assails us we should follow Jesus' example in looking to the Father in prayer. Paul wrote, "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). Too often, we respond to distress with fearful reactions, when Jesus would have us turn trustingly to the Father in prayer.

Thirdly, we should resolve, as Jesus did, for God's name to be glorified through our affliction. "What shall I say?" he asked. "'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name" (Jn. 12:27). The Christian should take up the same attitude when we are given crosses to bear. Our primary concern should be to bring glory to God by the faith, hope, and love we display in times of trouble.

The Bible teacher Ralph Keiper struggled all his life with extremely poor eyesight. It handicapped his studies when he was entering the ministry so that he fretted about this problem and frequently complained in his spirit. But one day, as he was dwelling on this, he felt that the Holy Spirit was saying to him, "Keiper, what is the chief end of man?" He knew the answer from his study of the catechism: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

“And is that your chief end?” the Holy Spirit prodded. “Of course,” he replied. At this point, the Spirit drove home his point to Keiper’s conscience: “Which would you rather have, perfect eyesight or the privilege of glorifying me?”¹¹

That is a question that could be suitably asked of each of us in our discouragement and affliction. And when we resolve, as Jesus did before us, to endure the struggle in trusting faith, we may look forward to the same response God pronounced to our Lord. God will say to us, “I have glorified my name in you, and will glorify it again.”

¹¹ Ibid., 3:949.