

“Bearing Fruit”  
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**John 12:20-33**

<sup>20</sup>Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

<sup>27</sup>“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say — ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

*What* was it that Jesus said? Something we just read doesn't make sense. John starts out telling us that there was a festival and there were some Greeks there – in other words, some Gentiles. They wanted to see Jesus, so they asked Philip, who told Andrew. Philip and Andrew went to tell Jesus that these Gentiles wanted to see Him. You'd think this would be a simple "yes" or "no" kind of a situation. "Sure, bring 'em over. I'd love to meet them." Or "Sorry, guys – we're running out of time. I don't think I can't meet anybody else today." You'd think something like one of those answers would be what Jesus responds, but that's not what John has recorded. He says "Jesus answered them" and we're first left wondering to whom the pronoun "them" refers. Is Jesus responding only to Philip and Andrew or are the Greeks – the Gentiles – part of this conversation, as well? To whomever Jesus is speaking, He responds in a way that doesn't seem to answer the question. Philip and Andrew tell Jesus that some Gentiles want to see Him, and Jesus responds "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Some have suggested that Jesus answered that way because the Gentiles asking to see Him was a fulfillment of the promises that Jesus would be the savior of all people, not just the Jews. The fact that these Gentiles were asking to see Jesus led Him to realize that the time was at hand for the next stage on the journey. The events of the preceding days and weeks have been foreshadowing this next stage. Jesus has just raised Lazarus from the dead, strongly pointing to His own resurrection to come. And now, it is time. In John 2:4, 7:30, and 8:20, John lets us know, sometimes in Jesus' own words, that His hour *had not yet* come. And now, in chapter 12, Jesus says "it's time." But what is it time for? It is time for Jesus' death, which makes His choice of words seem so strange. He says "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be *glorified*." Glorified?, we want to ask. How can anyone be glorified in crucifixion? Jesus was about to be executed on a cross, the Roman invention of torture and slow, agonizing death. The Romans executed people on crosses in public spectacles that were designed to teach everyone else

a lesson – mess with the Roman empire, mess with Ceasar, and you, too, will end up here. How can this be glorifying?

Poor Philip and Andrew. Some Gentiles want to come and meet this guy, Jesus, that they've heard all about, and Philip and Andrew are very proud to bring them over to meet Him. Perhaps they're hoping for a miracle, or something, but what they get is Jesus saying He is about to be glorified, through His death. What does Jesus mean? Can you imagine the looks on their faces when Jesus said that?

Perhaps Jesus did see the puzzled looks, because He took a little time to explain things. He tells them "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Now, I'm not a farmer. I'm not even a gardener. My thumb is quite brown. The amount of knowledge I have about grains of wheat is mighty small indeed. I do know that to get a seed, such as a grain, to grow, you've got to bury it in the earth. It's not going to grow as long as you are holding it in your hand. As long as it remains out of the earth, that grain is going to remain just one grain. But if you put it in the ground and add a little water, miraculous things can happen. That little grain of wheat can become a tall plant. While that seed is out of the ground, it is dormant, it is lifeless. But put it in the ground, and it comes to life. It sends out roots and sends a stem upward through the surface, growing and growing until its harvest can feed many people.

Jesus says that His death will work the same way. Through His death, new life will grow outward and upward and feed many people. But without the death, the miracle of new life cannot take place. Jesus is telling them about His death and how he will be glorified by it. And it is very difficult for us to understand. When someone dies, we don't celebrate their *death*. When someone is wrongfully executed by the government, we don't see that as glory! But we know the other side of this story. We know about Good Friday, and we know that Easter comes. In a way, we do

celebrate Jesus' death by decorating our sanctuary and our homes and our bodies with crosses of varying size and ornamentation. If someone from Jesus' time were sent here, they would not understand in the least why we have crosses – this symbol of Roman execution – decorating our worship space. They would not be able to comprehend why we wear gold-covered crosses on chains. To them, it would be like wearing a gold-covered miniature electric chair. *We* can see the glory in the cross because we know the rest of the story, but Philip and Andrew and the Gentiles must have really wondered how it could be that Jesus would be *glorified* through the cross, even with Jesus' metaphor of the grain of wheat.

But it *is* a good metaphor. Jesus' body will be sown like a grain of wheat into the earth, and then it will send roots down and a stem upward, bursting through the ground with power to feed all of us hungry souls. This is the core message of the gospel – that through Jesus we all can be saved. This is *how* it's all supposed to work. So many more people can and have heard of Jesus because of His death and resurrection than could have heard Him in person. We can all glory in the *results* of Jesus' death and resurrection.

But Jesus went on. It's not just Jesus who is to be glorified in what is to come. Jesus went on to say "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me..." Whoa – hold on, there, Jesus. Now, *you* can go on to the cross and be glorified there, that's just fine. But now you're talking about *me*. You want *me* – you want *us* – to die a death like yours? As Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. put it, "[Jesus] will not be dying alone. Yes, he'll be the first-fruits of this cycle of life out of death, but God isn't going to reap the whole harvest without dropping a lot of other grains into the earth too." Yes, Jesus says He is going to glory on the cross and He wants us to *share* that glory with Him. And we probably think that we'd prefer to take a pass on that glory. Jesus can handle the dying part, and we'll just

show up for the resurrection part. We much prefer Easter morning to the season of Lent, and definitely to Good Friday.

Jesus is inviting us to a proposition that will result in new growth that will bear much fruit, but we'd rather hang on to the old life that we've got. We'd rather stay right here out of the ground, than die to the selves we've always known and grow much fruit for the kingdom. We'd rather just worship on Sundays, than *truly* commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and bear fruit.

Jesus says that anyone who serves Him must follow Him, and I think that includes following Him to a death like His. That probably won't be true literally for most people, but we do have to die to the selfish selves that seem to be our nature and bury ourselves in the fertile ground of God so that we can grow and grow and bear much fruit. The really good news is that Jesus didn't just say we have to follow Him. He also said that He'd stay with us, throughout it all. "Where I am, there will my servant be also" He told us. And then, He tells us the even better news: "Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

Or, as my favorite modern paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, has it:

"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."

We're approaching the end of the season of Lent now. I know, I know – it's a long season and really it's not that much fun. It can be downright painful to truly examine ourselves and try to remove from our lives that which separates us from God. But it is worth it. It is worth it to be able to join in Jesus' glorification. It is worth it to be able to join in on a life that is affirming and leads to growth and much fruit. So, let us be reckless in love of our savior and go where He leads us.

Amen