

## Studies from the Gospel of John

### The Fragrance, the Life and the Light – Chapter 12:1-50

**1**Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2**Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3**Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

**4**But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5**"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." **6**He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

**7**"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8**You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

**9**Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. **10**So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, **11**for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

### The Triumphal Entry

**12**The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. **13**They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

"Hosanna! "

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the King of Israel!"

**14**Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

**15**"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;

see, your king is coming,  
seated on a donkey's colt."

**16**At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

**17**Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. **18**Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. **19**So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

### Jesus Predicts His Death

**20**Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. **21**They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." **22**Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

**23**Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. **24**I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. **25**The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **26**Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

## **Discussion**

John's account of our Lord's so-called triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem is very brief:

**The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it; as it is written,**

**"Fear not, daughter of Zion;  
behold, your king is coming,  
sitting on an ass's colt!" (John 12:12-15)**

The traditional view of this event is that it was a well-deserved recognition by our Lord of his Messiahship; that at last he was receiving a proper welcome as a King, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah which is quoted here. The crowd cried out, "Hosanna!" which means "Save us now!" The account indicates they saw him as a conqueror and acknowledged him to be the king of Israel. All appearances indicate the traditional idea that this was indeed a moment of joy and triumph for our Lord; that he was at last being received as he ought to be.

But that is to misunderstand what is happening here. Many of us have learned more from tradition than from Scripture, and tradition is usually distorted. A reading of the other gospels makes clear that this was not actually a welcome by the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

John himself tells us in Verse 12, "a great crowd who had come to the Feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem." Many if not all of the people who welcomed Jesus were not residents of the city, but pilgrims, in the city for the feast, many of them perhaps from other countries. In fact, in Matthew's account of this incident, he says that the whole city was stirred when they saw this procession coming down the Mount of Olives. But instead of joining in the "Hosannas!" they suspiciously asked, "Who is this?" The crowd making up the procession had to inform them, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth."

No one seems to have truly understood the nature of this event, as John makes evident in the next verses:

**His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. The reason why the**

**crowd went to meet him was that they had heard he had done this sign. The Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him." (John 12:16-19)**

Even the disciples were bewildered by this turn of events. They had been with Jesus in Galilee when the crowd had tried to crown him king following the feeding of the five thousand, but he would have nothing to do with that. Here, however, they see he is willing to receive the plaudits of the crowd. They must have been very confused at what was going on. In fact, we are told they did not know what this meant until after Jesus was glorified.

Here also was the multitude, caught up with the exciting news that Jesus had raised a man who had been dead four days. They were all anxious to see the wonderworker who had done this amazing thing. Then there were the belligerent Pharisees who had decided (we learn from the other gospels) not to take Jesus prisoner during the Passover feast because they feared the reaction of the multitude. But now, as they see the whole populace seemingly swept along by this appearance of Jesus, they say, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the whole world has gone after him." This event changed their schedule. They had to act now.

When Jesus came, in fulfillment of the prophecies that he would come as King, he was not riding on a war horse but on a donkey, a symbol of peace. His only scepter was a broken reed, his only crown a crown of thorns, his only throne a bloody cross. This whole scene is telling us that outward appearance means nothing to God when the heart is defiled and unyielded to him.

That is why John goes on immediately to link this with another event which probably occurred a day or two later in this strategic week -- the visit of certain Greeks to the feast:

**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 said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. 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. (John 12:20-24)**

The disciples must have been amazed at this reaction of our Lord. These Greeks probably had come into contact with the teaching of the Old Testament, drawn by its purity, its monotheism, its clear message of the nature and the greatness of God. Though they had not become Jews they did go up to the feast to celebrate along with the Jews. Remember that the outer courts of the temple were called "the courts of the Gentiles." Many Gentiles would go up at times like this to celebrate, although they could not go beyond those courts on pain of their life. These Greeks picked out the two disciples who had Greek names, Philip and Andrew. Philip, we are told, was from Bethsaida, on the northern side of the lake of Galilee, the area where the Gentiles had most fully settled. These were sincere people, not curious tourists, who said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Preachers often see this phrase written inside pulpits, offered as a message that hopefully reflects the desires of the congregation.

Here, however, these words awaken an unusual response from Jesus. When he hears that a group of Gentiles want to see him, his response is remarkable. Immediately he declares, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified!" Earlier in John's gospel Jesus said "My hour has not yet come." - When his mother came to him at the wedding at Cana and asked him to help with a problem he said to her, "Woman, ... my hour has not yet come," (John 2:4). He did not mean he would not help her, because he did. He meant that what he would do would not accomplish what she desired because his time had not yet come.

On several other occasions he made the same point. But the moment he hears of these Gentiles wanting to see him he responds in these words, "The hour has come..."

He goes on to say "Truly, truly, I say to you." When you see these words, pay close attention to what follows. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." What does he mean by that? He is talking about himself. He is the grain of wheat. Unless he is willing to die, unless he goes to the cross, which he seems looming in the immediate foreground now, his whole purpose in coming to earth will have been wasted, he will remain alone. "But if it dies, it bears much fruit." He sees these Greeks as the first fruits, the symbol of the great harvest of earth for which he came.

Perhaps he thought something like this: "These Greeks have asked to see me. What does it mean to 'see me'?" Picture a grain of wheat in your mind. Can you see that grain, so tiny, so obvious? Outwardly you can see what it is, but can you really see it? No. In order to see it you have to plant it in the cold, dark earth. If you watch it, eventually a green sprout will appear, then the blade, then the plant, then the stem, and finally a head. At last it turns golden; the harvest has come. But have you seen everything in that grain of wheat? No, not yet. You must plant those grains again and again. At last, when you stand one day beside a shimmering field of wheat, rippling in the breeze, golden in the sunshine, you can say you have seen a grain of wheat. You have seen all the possibilities of it; all of it has been unfolded and now is visible to the eye. That is what Jesus meant. The world would not see the full outcome of his work and his life until he went to the cross.

If he had not died ... Only a relative handful stood with him to the end. Because of the cross he was able to do something he could never have done otherwise: He was able to share his life with millions of people. How do we explain men like Martin Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli and others who changed the entire Western world during their lifetime? How do we explain the impact of men like the Wesley brothers? How do we explain Charles Colson, who was the hatchet man of the Nixon administration, Charles Colson and is now changing the prison system of this country in the name of Jesus? How do we explain people like Mother Teresa, and millions who daily evidence an altered life, a changed outlook? All has come about because of the cross of Christ. God is saying to us in this account that the only way to true glory is to die.

Jesus applies this to us in the next two verses:

**"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also [the servant will not be any different than Jesus; he will have to go the way Jesus went]; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." (John 12:25-26)**

Here is the great Christian paradox, the unmistakable mark of an authentic gospel. It begins with dying, with a cross. If the gospel that you hear preached on the radio, the television, or wherever, does not begin with a cross, does not begin by telling you that something in you has to die, it is not the true gospel. This is the identifying mark. How these words of Jesus cut across the philosophy of life today! Every television program, every magazine, every popular song, all present the philosophy, "Your life is your own! Live it the way you please! Watch out for No. 1! Do your own thing! Live so that you can join with Frank Sinatra singing, 'I Did It My Way!'" But Jesus declares that if you follow that philosophy you will lose everything. Life will slip through your fingers no matter what you do. You can gain all the material abundance you could ever wish for, the plaudits of the crowd, recognition by the whole world, but if you live that way you will end up with nothing; your life will be a total waste of time.

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." That doesn't mean you have to hate yourself. It means you must recognize that living for yourself will never supply what

you really want out of life. Only as you surrender to the Lordship of Christ can that be brought about. That is why the gospel includes a cross, and why the cross has become the symbol of Christian faith. If the message you hear does not begin there, then it's a false gospel.

Dr. A. W. Tozer, the great preacher shared the following:

The cross is the symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of the human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said goodbye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going out to have his life redirected. He was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing. It slew all of the man completely and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck swift and hard and when it had finished its work the man was no more. That evangelism which draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of man is false to the Bible and cruel to the soul of the hearers. The faith of Christ does not parallel the world. It intersects it. In coming to Christ we do not bring our life up on to a higher plane. We leave it at a cross. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. That is the beginning of the gospel.