

AM John 12:20-26

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Date: 19 April 2026

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[0:00] John's Gospel, chapter 11, from verse 38. And this is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus. Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb.

! It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days. Jesus said to her, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone, and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me. But I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him, and let him go.

[1:12] Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, what are we to do?

For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, you know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord. But being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation. And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God, who were scattered abroad.

So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Jesus, therefore, no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness to a town called Ephraim.

[2:23] And there he stayed with his disciples. Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves.

They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all? Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him. Just reading to there for the moment. May God, John chapter 12, and we're reading from verse 12 to verse 26, two of the sections here.

John chapter 12 and from verse 12, entitled The Triumphal Entry. The next day, the large crowd that 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 out, Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel.

[3:37] And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion. Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.

His disciples did not understand these things at first. But when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about 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, continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign.

So the Pharisees said to one another, You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him. 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.

[4 : 42] Andrew and Philip went and 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. Whoever loves his life loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

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 honour him.

May God bless to us this reading too. Now we want to look at John's Gospel, chapter 12. And this passage that speaks of some Greeks seeking Jesus.

So let's read again verses 23 to 25. John 12 at verse 23. And Jesus answered them, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

[5 : 56] 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.

Whoever loves his life loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Now it may seem as if there isn't really a theme in these three verses.

They don't seem naturally to work together in any pattern. So I thought at least at first. And then I realised that probably we should think of this as a unit.

And what is happening here is that there's a big idea that Jesus has. And that big idea is illustrated in verse 24.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. And then verse 23 is how that could be applied to Jesus' experience.

[7 : 03] The hour has come that the Son of Man may be glorified. And what he's really saying is, The hour has come that this grain of seed should fall into the ground and die and bear fruit.

And then the verse 25 is that same principle of the grain of wheat falling into the ground and be fruitful. It's that same principle applied in general.

And we can take it therefore as an application to the life of the believer. So we've got a big idea illustrated, applied to the life of Jesus, and then applied to the life of the believer.

And that's the way we're going to try and open up these three verses. And in this way you see, we're going to get a better picture of who Jesus is. The sort of thing that has been going on in these passages.

We've got stories that tell us who Jesus is and what he's here to do. And this is another story or another incident that illustrates that.

[8 : 07] And then at the same time we're seeing a picture of Jesus. We've also got a picture of Christian conduct. So that we've got something that is a practical application for us in our lives today.

That's the way we're going to deal with this. So first of all we've got the big idea that he's dealing with here. Illustrated. And that's in verse 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.

Now as an illustration, this is pretty simple really. And we should be able quite easily to appreciate what he's saying. For a seed to grow, something like death must take place.

If you just keep a seed and preserve it, it remains alone. Nothing happens. In the proper conditions, you can preserve seeds for years.

[9 : 10] For decades indeed. And maybe in very special circumstances for thousands of years. But they'll still be just what they were. They don't produce. They don't mature.

They tend to deteriorate and decay. That's what happens if you just keep the seed. But if you put the seed into the ground and bury it, then something happens.

Now that's like as if it was dead. You're treating it like a dead thing. Dead and buried. That's the way it seems. I know it's not that. But for the purposes of an illustration, you can see what Jesus is getting at.

It's as if you were treating the seed as dead and buried. And then what comes of that? That's when it becomes fruitful. In these conditions, it bears fruit.

And so the big idea that is being illustrated here is that death is a path to fruitfulness. There must be this process that looks to be so unproductive before there can be something productive.

[10:17] That's the way it is with seeds in the natural world. And that's the way that it is in the particular cases that John is going to deal with here. That's the way it is in the providence of God.

Death produces life. And if you don't have that experience of death, you won't have that experience of life either. And it's that simple counterintuitive idea that is being illustrated in this parable.

We can call it that. It's an illustration, a parable. And that's the parable illustrated. Quite simple.

Okay. So how is this connected with what goes before and what goes after?

Well, I'm suggesting really that what we've got here in verse 23, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Jesus is really saying here, the time has come for the grain of wheat, myself, to fall into the ground and die.

And then I will be fruitful. That's the idea that he's got in mind here. Now let's unwrap that a wee bit. The hour has come, says Jesus.

[11:29] This was a common way of speaking about Jesus' life. The hour has come. It's a way of saying there's a time coming when something big is going to happen.

It's a time appointed by God. It's a time in set circumstances, something in set circumstances. And nothing's going to happen until that time comes.

And it's been used frequently in this gospel especially. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, he's speaking about worship. And the worship in the temple or in Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans worship.

And Jesus says, the hour is coming and it's now when the two worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. So the hour is coming.

There's a time ahead when something big is going to happen. And when that big thing happens, then there's going to be a complete revolution in our style of worship. It won't be centered on the temple with all its material things.

[12:36] It's going to be something spiritual that isn't tied down to a particular place. And that's part of what is going to happen when the hour comes.

There's other big things that happen as well. We've got this, truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

Now I think that's speaking of the power of the gospel. To come to people and address them in such a way that they come to spiritual life. But at any rate, however we look at it, Jesus looking forward and saying, there's a set time, something big is going to happen.

And part of that picture will be that people are going to hear the gospel and respond to it as never before. So there are these big and positive features in Jesus looking forward to his hour coming. But mainly, it seems to me, there are negative aspects to the hour that is before Jesus and that he anticipates coming.

[13:44] There's a time when the people try to arrest him. And then we read this. Then they sought to take him, but no man lays hands on him because his hour was not yet come.

So what did the coming of the hour mean? It would be a time when people would lay hands on Jesus. They couldn't do it at that stage because the hour hadn't come.

But the implication is that that's something that's going to happen when the hour comes. It's going to be a time when he's arrested, when he's taken prisoner. And worse than that, because here's another quotation along the same sort of lines.

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. What did the hour that was to come mean for him?

A time of deep distress. A time that the contemplation of which made his soul sorrowful and troubled. He was disturbed within himself when he thought about the coming of this hour.

[14:53] And he would like it to pass. But he says, no, I'm going to go to that hour. And of course it's obvious that what he's speaking about in these things is that the coming of the hour implies the time of his death.

The time of his suffering and death. And what follows from that. And here we've got it here in this passage then. The hour has come.

The hour when he's going to be taken. The hour when he's going to suffer. And also the hour when he's going to see a revolution in worship and blessing in gospel power.

The hour has come, he says. I think we can notice both aspects of that. The downside and the upside. There's a downside of that. The coming of the hour means death.

And that undoubtedly has been what has been hinted at throughout the passages that go before this. The story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And the story of Mary anointing Jesus.

[15:58] And the story of the triumphal entry. The death of Jesus is very much in his mind in these passages.

We know that he was very sorrowful when he saw the grave of Lazarus.

And we wonder why was he so sorrowful. And one possibility was this. That he saw his own death foreshadowed in that. He thought to himself.

As this man is dead and buried. That's going to be my experience. And that may have been part of the trouble that he felt when he contemplated the grave of Lazarus.

Or in the story of... Judas is brought into the picture in the story of Mary anointing Jesus with oil.

[16:54] With ointment. Judas is brought in and is described as the betrayer. A hint of what the future holds. The shadow of the cross falling upon his path.

And death is in the background to this. And so we have it in particular in the way in which the Pharisees and the Jewish authorities reacted to the popularity of Jesus.

Consequent upon embracing Lazarus from the dead. They met together and they said we can't let things go on like this. We've got to do something about it. Everybody's going to believe in him.

And then the Romans are going to come. And they're going to take away our place and our nation.

And Caiaphas, the high priest, intervenes and says, You know nothing about things.

You don't realise that it is necessary. It's expedient. That one man should die for the people. And not that the whole nation should perish. And he was prophesying.

[17:54] He didn't know he was prophesying. But he was making a prophecy. That's what was going to happen. One man was going to die. So that the whole nation need not perish.

That's the background to this. The hour has come. The hour when that prophecy is to be fulfilled.

And so it was after the triumphal entry.

They again meet together. And they again say things aren't going to be allowed to go on like this. We've got to do something about it.

And even Jesus himself, when he was anointed with ointment by Mary, says she did this from a burial. That's what he's got in mind.

This is what is normally done at burial. This is what's being done to him then. Because his burial is imminent. And it seems to me that all this background leads up to the statement.

[18:54] The hour has come. The hour of suffering and death. That has been lying there in the background. That has been casting a shadow over his path.

That has been brought up by the scribes and Pharisees and so on. That hour of death has come.

And he's saying the time has come for the grain of wheat to fall into the ground and die.

That's what he's speaking about here. But then you see there's the other side of it. What does the coming of the hour mean? It means big things. Not just the suffering and death of Jesus. It means big things.

And that's what we've got here as well. He doesn't say the hour has come for the Son of Man to suffer and to die. Although I think that's implied in it.

He does say the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. So he's not just saying the time has come for the corn of grain to fall into the ground and die.

[19:53] The time has come for the seed that is sown to flourish and be productive. And in that situation the Son of Man will be glorified.

What does he have in mind here? Well, what should we have in mind here? Well, I would think we would probably think of him rising from the dead, ascending to heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Was that not Jesus glorified? Was that not the Son of Man glorified? Yes, it was. Undoubtedly, that is part of the picture. There's two things, however, I'd like to say more particularly.

One is this. I don't think that he's excluding here a reference to his death. Because there is nothing that glorified the Son or the Father so much as the death of Jesus.

I know we think of it in terms of his humiliation. And rightly so. But I think there are passages that might suggest that this should be thought of in terms of exaltation as well.

[21 : 07] In other words, it's an act that exalts the name of God in a way that no other act in history has done. And when it says here, the Son of Man will be glorified.

We don't need to start necessarily at the resurrection. We can start at the death of Jesus. Because there, the glory of God is revealed in a remarkable fashion.

There, the justice of God is revealed. Because God is plainly saying, I will not let sin go unpunished. God is plainly saying, you cannot just forgive sins and forget them as if they never existed.

Or as if there was no standard of justice. He is saying, my justice must be satisfied. And the glory of the cross is partly that it is a display of his justice.

Satisfaction must be rendered to the broken law. But also, of course, it's an expression, a supreme expression of grace. Satisfaction is rendered by Jesus in the name of his people.

[22 : 23] The sword of judgment falls upon Jesus as representing his own folks. And therefore, it's a supreme expression of mercy. And that, you see, is what makes the cross so exalting to God.

Such an event that glorifies, it displays two aspects of his excellency that are not usually joined together. The justice of God and the mercy of God are expressed in the one act of Jesus' crucifixion in a unique fashion.

I haven't looked at it greatly. But I suspect that in other religions, you think either of God being just or God being merciful. But you don't think of them acting together as if he could be both at the one time.

And I think it's one of the unique features of the Christian faith. That you don't say, oh, God chose to be merciful and lay aside his justice.

No, it's both of these are operative together. The act that displays God's justice, namely the crucifixion, is an act that displays his mercy at one and the same time.

[23 : 38] And it's not the case of laying aside his justice in order to be merciful. It's being just and the one that justifies the ungodly. That's the glory of the crucifixion.

So, all I'm saying is that when we think of Jesus saying, now is the Son of Man glorified, we happen to think that necessarily he was starting with a resurrection. This is part of the picture.

The glory, the excellencies of God, of Jesus displayed in the crucifixion itself. But the other thing that I want to say, of course, is to tie in this with what is actually happening here.

Because this statement that he makes about the corn of wheat falling to the ground and so on, is a response to an event that has happened. Namely, that some Greeks who had come to worship at the feast come looking for Jesus.

And it's that that encourages Jesus to say, that's a situation in which Jesus says, the elders come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

[24 : 41] He's glorified in these Greeks coming to see him. Now, that was a big event. These Greeks were men, no doubt, who had got in touch with the synagogue, because there were synagogues all over the known world of the time.

And people learned from the Jewish people that there was one God, not like the gods of Greek and Rome that were multiple and had all sorts of funny things happening to them.

They believed in one God, like the Jews did. And they were led to connect themselves with a synagogue. And so they had come to worship at the feast.

They weren't able to worship in the same way as the Jews, but nonetheless, they were able, they associated themselves with the Jewish people to such an extent that they came up to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover, along with other Jews that came from all over the world.

And these men say, we want to see Jesus. And that's an enormous thing that's happening.

Because what Jesus is seeing here is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

[25 : 51] The fulfillment of the prophecy that was said, that was given to Abraham, in you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.

Now, when did that happen? Well, it was about to happen through Jesus giving himself on the cross, being raised from the dead, and the gospel being presented throughout the world. Then, through Jesus, that promise was going to be fulfilled.

In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. And in these Greeks that come to see him, Jesus sees the fulfillment of that. He sees the foretaste of that. He sees the first sheaves of the harvest gathered in.

I know it doesn't make sense logically, but really what is happening is that before the seed has even fallen into the ground and died, the fruit is already there. He, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross and despised the shame.

What was that joy that was set before him? In part, it was, I think, this experience here. These Greeks that came. He saw these as a foretaste of a great company of people from the world over that were going to seek him once he had died and raised from the dead and the gospel was preached amongst all nations.

[27 : 07] It was a foretaste of the great harvest that was to come. So here you see it's the positive side of that illustration that he's used. Falling into the ground and dying.

That was the death that he was looking forward to. But not abiding alone, but producing a harvest. That's what he's seeing here in the Greeks that have come to see him. And that's the picture that emerges here of Jesus in his mission of suffering and success.

The one that dies, dies but brings life. The one that gives himself to death, brings life to the nations. That's what we've got illustrated here in this incident.

And that's the picture of Christ that we've got. Yes, he's a suffering saviour. We know that. But the great thing that's brought out to our attention here is he's a successful saviour.

The corn grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies. And it doesn't abide alone. It does produce a harvest. And Jesus sees it here in these Greeks that come to see him.

[28 : 10] And we can look around at the world today and say, yes, he's been successful. We're here. That's success. All over the world, people are worshipping today. That's success. The corn of wheat that fell into the ground has indeed produced a harvest.

Is producing a harvest. Our saviour may suffer, but he suffers with positive results. He gives himself to death. And the result is life for the nations. That's the way that this illustration is applied to the experience of Jesus himself.

Now, I think in verse 25, we've got to say that this is applied to the life of the believer as well.

Whoever loves his life loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Now, it's not immediately apparent that this is connected with what's gone before it. But if you look at it, it really contains the same sort of idea as is contained in that illustration of the wheat grain dying in order to produce life.

That's counterintuitive. That's counterintuitive. You don't expect death to produce life. But it does. And it works in this way as well.

[29 : 26] That the one that loves his life loses it. And the one that hates his life finds it. Keeps it for eternal life. It's the same principle that is at work.

Jesus, in effect, is saying here, this principle that is applied to my life is applicable to your life as well. You must, as it will, fall into the ground and die if you want there to be anything productive in your experience.

You must hate your life. That's one way of putting it. You must give up your life in order to find life. That's the idea that he's putting across here.

There must be a dying to self. There must be this process of losing our lives in order to find it. And that's, you see, quite plainly what happened when Jesus gave himself on the cross.

He wasn't holding on to his life. He wasn't loving his life to such an extent that he clung to it. And the result of that was indeed that he kept his life for eternity.

[30 : 36] These words can be applied to Jesus. And therefore, it's an extension of this illustration that he's been making. And it applies here as a common principle that fits the believer's life.

There must be a dying to self in some way. Now, actually, there's quite a number of shades of meaning that can come to this, depending what passages of the scripture we look at.

And really, it's too big an idea to go into in any detail. But there must be a dying to self. There must be a dying to our own righteousness.

Paul speaks of his privileges and says, He was circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as the law of Pharisee.

And then he says, he rejects all these things. But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

[31 : 40] There is a rejection of his life as he has lived it, as a basis of his acceptance with God. Good though he may have been, it doesn't count.

He counts it as rubbish in order that he may come to Christ. And that's a way of describing the initial experience of coming to Christ. We give up our past way of life.

Our past way of life, if we think it righteous, we give it up as a basis of righteousness and count it as rubbish. Because it just won't do. And we come to Christ.

Or if we think our life is a life of rubbish anyway, a life of sinfulness, we give that too up in order to come to Christ. So there's a dying to self in that respect.

That's one way we could put it. It implies a complete yielding of ourselves to Christ. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[32 : 39] Now this doesn't mean to say that we've got to be as hard on ourselves as possible and we've got to hurt ourselves as much as we can. It's not talking about that at all. It's simply that there must be a complete yielding of our wills to the will of Christ.

No longer what we want or we think appropriate, but what he wants and what he thinks appropriate. Not what I will, but what you will. That's the sort of standard that Jesus sought.

And it fits into this idea of not loving our lives. And we could say it involves dying to sin. Of dying to self.

And again we've got Paul here. If you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. So there's a dying that needs to take place.

A dying to the deeds of the body. Or elsewhere he says, put to death. Therefore what is earthly in you. And he goes on and mentions our natural sinfulness.

[33 : 38] Put it to death. There's got to be a dying. All these ideas may be connected with this sort of thing. And you can see what is implied in this. There must be an experience of giving up ourselves and yielding everything to Christ.

Of being able to say, I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And that experience is what is going to go on to bring eternal blessings.

If we don't do that, the opposite is the case. It's only by doing this that we actually do keep it to eternity. Give up life now and we receive back in full and with interest.

That's the way that God does things. So this is a pattern therefore of Christian obedience. So that's the message of this passage as far as I can see it. And it's centered on this basic principle.

So death has got to take place in order that there might be life and productiveness. It happened in the life of Jesus when he suffered and died. And when he brought forth a great harvest through people responding to the gospel.

[34 : 48] It happens in our case as we die to self and live to Christ and yield ourselves to him. That we'll know all the blessings of eternal life.

But when you put these two things together, the experience of Jesus in this respect and the experience of ours. It makes us realize how fitting it is that we should deny ourselves and give everything over to Jesus.

What did it cost him? It cost him everything. The suffering and death that we know about. It was a costly, costly thing. And compared to that, what can we give to him?

Nothing much. The best that we can do is to deny ourselves and give our lives over to him. To offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy to God.

That's the sort of thing that we have to think about. So this puts upon us an obligation of dedication, of devotion. Realizing that Jesus was a grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died.

[35 : 55] In order to bring the blessings that we ourselves enjoy. May God bless to us his word.