

John 12:20–33

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. ²⁷ “I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered and said, “This voice did not come for my sake but for yours. ³¹ Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.” ³³ He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.



*The Gentiles Ask to See Jesus, James Tissot
(1886-1894) | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US*

End or Beginning?

During Ordinary Times, the lectionary selection for readings largely follow the flow the gospel accounts. But this is Lent and the gospels are taken to reflect, not the sequence of gospel events, but large themes important to the Lenten season. Previously on the 4th Sunday of Lent we read from John 3; this week we jump all the way to John 12. This chapter is located at the end of a multi-chapter section called the “Book of Signs” which contains all the miracle stories from the Gospel of John. A quick recounting of preceding events include: the anointing of Jesus’ feet by Mary a type of burial anointing, the triumphs entry into Jerusalem, and then our gospel.

The standard treatment is that these stories mark the end of Jesus' public ministry. In regards to this larger context, O'Day [681] suggests the significance of chapters 11-12 is lost when they are taken as the conclusion to Jesus' public ministry – the way John is commonly outlined. Rather, in her outline 10:22-42 forms the conclusion and 11-12 “stand as a bridge between Jesus' ministry and his hour. They belong neither to the public ministry nor to the story of Jesus' hour, but constitute their own section within the Gospel narrative. John 11-12 move the public ministry into the context of Jesus' death.”

Her outline of these chapters which she calls: The Prelude to Jesus' Hour (11:1-12:50) is:

A. Jesus' Hour Prefigured (John 11:1-12:11)

1. The Raising of Lazarus (11:1-44)
2. The Decision to Kill Jesus (11:45-54)
3. Jesus' Anointing at Bethany (11:55-12:11)

B. Jesus' Entry into Jerusalem (12:12-19) ending with “*Look, the whole world has gone after him.*”

C. Jesus Interprets His Death (12:20-36) beginning with Greeks (representing the world) wishing to see Jesus.

D. The Epilogue to Jesus' Ministry (12:37-50)

1. The Evangelist's Commentary on Jesus' Ministry (12:37-43)
2. A Summary Discourse by Jesus (12:44-50)

End of public ministry or “bridge between Jesus' ministry and his hour?” Always interesting to see the differing perspective.

Commentary

In John 11:47, as Jesus' popularity grew, the Pharisee had asked of one another: what are we to do? The Pharisees themselves testify to the fulfillment of their fears in v.19: “*So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him.”*” Their confession of vulnerability (“*You see that you are gaining nothing*”); their hyperbolic announcement that the “world” (*kosmos*) has gone after Jesus provides ironic testimony to the truth of Caiaphas's prophecy: ⁵⁰ *nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish.*” ⁵¹ *He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,* ⁵² *and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God.* (John 11:50-02)

The Pharisees and the Jewish leaders unwittingly confirm one of the central tenets of the Gospel: Jesus came to save the world (3:16–17); he is the Savior of the world (4:42). Their words thus provide a fitting conclusion to the entry narrative, in which the crowd came to see Jesus and wrongly greeted Jesus as their national hero.

How Does One See Jesus? ²⁰ *Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast.* ²¹ *They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”*

As the “Palm Sunday” crowds fade in the narrative, the arrival of the Greeks marks the beginning of a new section. Leon Morris [251] introduces these verses as being peculiar to John and rather curious. He says:

“rather curious because it is unusual that we encounter Greeks in a narrative of events at Jerusalem, because the other Evangelists do not mention the incident, and because the Greeks simply say, “*Sir, we would like to see Jesus*” and then disappear from the narrative. Clearly John regards their coming as

significant but he does not treat their presence as important. Jesus recognizes in their coming an indication that the climax of his mission has arrived. Immediately when he hears of them he says, “*The hour has come*,” and goes on to speak of his glorification and of death. In this Gospel we see Jesus as the world’s Savior, and evidently John means us to understand that this contact with the Greeks ushered in the climax. The fact that the Greeks had reached the point of wanting to meet Jesus showed that the time had come for him to die for the world. He no longer belongs to Judaism, which in any case has rejected him. But the world, whose Savior he is, awaits him and seeks for him.”

These Greeks begin by asking Philip, “*Sir, we would like to see Jesus.*” Philip takes them to Andrew. It may be that these two are singled out because they have Greek names. Narratively, they were the first disciples who brought Jews to Jesus. Andrew brings his brother Peter (1:42) and Philip brings his friend Nathanael (1:45). Thus, they serve as a connection between the first Jewish disciples and the first Gentile disciples – if the request to “see” Jesus is interpreted as their desire to have a meeting with Jesus so as to become his disciples. (O’Day interprets it this way; Brown in the Anchor Bible on John raises this same possibility.)

The hour has come...

The introduction of a new group of people (*some Greeks*) indicates a new narrative and thrust of the gospel message. Anyone could “see” Jesus as he was in the Temple precincts. I think it is a given that the Greeks wanted more.

Even if their desire to “see” Jesus doesn’t mean “become a follower,” their presence relates to Jesus’ statement in v. 32, “*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.*” It should be noted there is a variant reading of “all things” (*panta*) in many ancient Greek manuscripts rather than “all people” (*pantas*). That being said, the coming of the Greeks symbolizes the drawing of all people to Jesus. His hour has come.

Just before our text we are told that a crowd had come to Jesus because they had heard that he had raised Lazarus from the dead (12:18). Soon after our text we are told: “*Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him*” (12:37). “Seeing” is not believing in John’s gospel. The place to see Jesus in all his glory is not just the miraculous (2:11, 11:4, 40), which may not produce faith; but seeing his glory on the cross (12:23; 21:19).

Perhaps, they wanted to interview Jesus – although they give no reason for this. Up to this point in time, John has given no indication that Jesus’ reputation was such that Greeks would have heard of him; though perhaps they are from Decapolis. Those people may well have heard about Jesus. But the general tone of John’s Gospel leaves certainly leads us to assume the point of the inquiry: Jesus was the Savior of the world, and this group of Gentiles symbolically represents the world seeking its salvation from Jesus.

Oddly, Jesus seems to ignore the Greeks; in fact, there is no immediate or subsequent reference to them. Still what follows makes it difficult to assume Jesus’ audience is limited to Andrew and Philip. There is a wider audience in mind. Clearly, the coming of the Greeks is important to Jesus. Morris notes [252]: “Jesus views it as evidence that his mission has reached its climax and that he is now to die for the world, Greeks included. ... The gospel is a gospel for the whole world only because of the cross. Their presence leads to Jesus’ response, “*The hour has come...*”

We are reminded of the series of references to “the hour” throughout the Gospel. Though unobtrusive, this is one of the important themes in this Gospel. It marks that for which Jesus is destined. At Cana, “the hour” had not yet arrived. Now it has. The verb “*has come*” is in the perfect tense, i.e.,: “the hour has come and stays with us.” There is no going back on it. In referring to his “hour” there is no doubt but that Jesus is referring to his death (see v.24). But he speaks not of tragedy but of triumph. He is not to be dishonored; he is to be glorified and that by the way of the cross.

A grain of wheat. . .²⁴ Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.

Immediately upon pronouncing that the “hour” is a path to “glory,” we are given a metaphor. The grain of wheat introduces us to a paradox, namely, that the way of fruitfulness lies through death. Unless the wheat falls into the ground and “dies” it will not bear fruit. It is only through “death” that its potentiality for fruitfulness becomes actual. This is a general truth; but it refers particularly to Jesus – and no less to us. The expression “*loves his life loses it*” is, in the Greek, anchored by *apollyei* – an interesting word. Here it is translated as “lose” but its primary meaning is “destroy, lose, die, perish, be lost.” [ENDT 1:135]. Might we not read, “Whoever loves his life [here on earth to the point of forsaking all else], destroys it.” John means us to understand that loving this life to the exclusion of others and all else, is a self-defeating process. It destroys the very immortal life we seek to retain: “*whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.*” “Hates,” of course, is not to be taken literally, but “hating the life” is the antithesis of loving it (cf. Matt. 6:24 = Luke 16:13; Luke 14:26). It is clear when one thinks of being intentional and choosing (love) or not choosing (hate). It points to the attitude that sets no store by this life in itself. People whose priorities are right have such an attitude of love for the things of God.

As Jesus mentions his own self-giving (vv. 23–24), he joins to it that of his disciples. They are called to identical roles (vv. 25–26) in the service of, in and through Christ. Relationship to Christ is important. The servant must follow his Lord and be where his Lord is. A.M. Hunter in his commentary on this gospel said it well. “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.” This must be understood in the light of the previous verses: being where the Lord is entails suffering. It means losing one’s life for the Master’s sake. There is no other way of Christian service. But the verse concludes on a different note. Anyone who serves Christ in this fashion will be honored by the Father. It is the only time in the Gospel that God is spoken of as honoring someone, and it anticipates the mutuality of relationship among God, Jesus, and the believer as promised in the Farewell Discourse (John 14-17).

The Glory of God. ²⁷ “*I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour.*” ²⁸ “*Father, glorify your name.*” Then a voice came from heaven, “*I have glorified it and will glorify it again.*”

With the word “*now*” the focus returns to Jesus’ hour and St. John portrays a different Jesus than the one we encounter in Gethsemane as portrayed by the other gospel writers. The first prayer, framed as a question (“*Yet what should I say?*”), is never prayed by Jesus and stands in distinction of the prayer associated with Jesus’ agony in the garden (Mark 14:36) even as it echoes that tradition. Unlike the Markan text, the focus of vv. 27–28a is on the immediacy and urgency of Jesus’ hour (“*now*”), not on his struggle in the face of that hour. It is the second prayer that reflects the focus of this moment: “*Father, glorify your name.*” This is the focus and true prayer of the hour. Jesus lays down his life of his own free will (10:18); he embraces his hour as an expression of his love for God and the moment of God’s glorification. [O’Day, 712].

Jesus’ prayer is confirmed by the voice from heaven: “*Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and will glorify it again.’*” Note that past, present, and future are summonsed in this response. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, God as revealed God’s self through his only Son. It is God’s testimony to the events of the hours as well as all that led up to it and all that will follow. It carries an echo of raising of Lazarus: “This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (John 11:4). As well “[I] *will glorify it again*” anticipates Jesus’ prayer in John 17 in which the past, present, and future of God’s glorification of Jesus are also combined.

Misunderstanding. ²⁹ *The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him."* ³⁰ *Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake but for yours."*

The Gospel according to John is replete with revelation being misunderstood. Nicodemus misses the point in his talk with Jesus, as do many others in their encounter with the Messiah. Perhaps the same is true of the crowds present. Their opinions of the sound being thunder or the voice of an angel is headed in the right direction. Thunder was a common religious symbol for the voice of God (e.g., Exod 4:23; Ps 29:3–9), and angels were traditionally understood as God’s messengers (e.g., Gen 16:7; 18:2–8; 19:1; Luke 1:11, 26; 2:9). The crowd’s hearing the voice of God as either thunder or an angel’s voice suggests that the crowd recognized that they were witnesses to an epiphany, some revelation of the divine, but that they missed the point: they were witnesses to the unmediated presence of God in God’s relationship to Jesus. His words in v. 30 underscore that this is indeed what the crowd has missed.

Jesus explained that the voice did not come for his sake but for theirs. And as Morris points out [530-1] if this removes one difficulty it introduces another. Jesus did not need to be reassured, but if it was intended primarily for the crowds, why did they not understand it? Perhaps because they lacked the spiritual acuity to recognize the voice of God. But the voice would be of the greatest value to those of his followers who could take in something of its significance, even though they lacked the spiritual awareness to understand it fully here at “the hour.” Upon later reflection, the memory of that voice would be assuring.

For the Sake of the World. ³¹ *Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.* ³² *And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.* ³³ *He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.*

This unusual mixture of dialogue and monologue seems to come to its point and purpose: “*Now is the time of judgment..*” It should echo the words spoken at the end of the dialogue/monologue with Nicodemus in John 3:

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

The light is in the world (cf. John 1:4-5) and that light draws all people to it.

So what does it mean when Jesus says that “*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself*” (12:32) or “*No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me*” (6:44)? The word “draw” (*helko*) is often an offensive word. It generally means physically forcing someone or something to go where they don’t want to go. It is used of “hauling” in nets full of fish (John 21:6, 11). It is used of “dragging” Paul and Silas before the authorities (Acts 16:19) and Paul away from the Temple (Acts 21:30). It is used of the rich “dragging” people into court (James 2:6). There is an even more intensive form, *helkeo*, meaning “*to drag about, tear asunder; to mistreat.*” These are not very comforting images.

I have no real answer for this query, but I wonder if the “strong” *helko* matches what one would see when looking upon Jesus crucified; when one contemplates the scene at Calvary. It is not a warm, fuzzy scene – not one that a person would naturally stare at – and yet, it is compelling, it is hard to turn away from it. Maybe in that sense we are indeed “drawn.” Draw” brings out the truth that people do not naturally come to Christ. It is only as God works in one’s soul and draws one that one can come to Christ.

Epilogue to the Sunday Gospel. These verses are considered part of the narrative but are not part of our Sunday reading. It is clear that St. John continues with his themes of misunderstanding, light/dark, and that “the hour” has come – an hour for decision.

³⁴ So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. Then how can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “The light will be among you only a little while. Walk while you have the light, so that darkness may not overcome you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light.” After he had said this, Jesus left and hid from them.

Again, I find O’Day’s insights thoughtful and to the point, so again, I offer her words as a

A Final Reflection

Gail O’Day, 713-15

John 12:20–36 is the most concentrated collection of sayings on the death of Jesus in the Gospel of John and, therefore, provides the interpreter with an appropriate place to reflect on the meaning of the death of Jesus in this Gospel. Theological inquiry about Jesus’ death and its soteriological [things relating to salvation] efficacy is most frequently identified as “atonement theology.” Before looking at the Johannine understanding of the death of Jesus, it will be helpful to review the theologies of atonement that have shaped and continue to shape the life of the church.

It is conventional to speak of three atonement theologies that have had the most influence on the church’s understanding of the death of Jesus. These three models are commonly identified as (1) the ransom or “classical” theory, in which Jesus’ death is understood as the act of ransom (payment) that bought the world its freedom from sin and death; (2) the substitutionary or sacrificial victim model, in which Christ’s death is understood as the sacrifice necessary to atone for human guilt and sin; and (3) the “moral influence” theory, in which Jesus’ death is understood as a model of moral behavior because it reveals to humanity how much God loves them.

None of the traditional atonement theologies presents a soteriology that accords with that offered in the Fourth Gospel. Theologies of ransom or substitution are wholly absent from this Gospel’s understanding of the cross. For example, as the discussion of John 10:1–21 pointed out, Jesus is not a victim at his death, but is in complete control (see 12:27–28 also). Abelard’s theology of Jesus’ death on the cross as the demonstration of God’s love captures part of the Fourth Gospel’s soteriology, but as the discussion below will suggest, it overlooks the demand for human response and decision that is an essential part of Jesus’ “glorification” in John.

In reflecting on the Johannine understanding of the death of Jesus, it is important to begin by remembering that theologies of atonement are in actuality theologies of reconciliation—that is, they attempt to explain how God and humanity were reconciled to one another in Jesus’ death. There is a disheartening tendency in theological conversations in the contemporary North American church to subsume all models of reconciliation under the umbrella of “sacrifice.” Sacrifice is one way of understanding reconciliation, but not the only way. Jesus’ sayings in John 12:23–36 suggest an alternative model of reconciliation, one that is built around the restoration of relationship.

John 12:24 noted that Jesus’ death is described as both necessary and life-giving because as a result of it community is formed (“much fruit”). The discipleship teachings in vv. 25–26, which in the synoptic traditions define discipleship exclusively as taking up one’s cross, instead define discipleship as serving Jesus and make clear that the goal of such service is restored relationship with God and Jesus. The passion prediction in 12:32 also focuses on relationship, that through Jesus’ death all people will be drawn to him. Finally, in the concluding teaching of vv. 35–36, community is described as “becoming children of light.”

Throughout the Gospel, this new relationship to God and one’s fellow human beings is described in the metaphors of new birth and new or eternal life (e.g., 3:3–8; 4:14; 5:24; 6:40, 47, 54; 10:28; 17:3). Jesus’

glorification is the final step in the offer of this new life, because through Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension God's relationship to the world itself is irrevocably changed. The world that lives in opposition to Jesus ("this world") is judged by Jesus' death, and its power overcome (vv. 25, 31). Jesus' death has this effect, not because it is a sacrifice that atones for human sin, but because it reveals the power and promise of God and God's love decisively to the world.

What is striking about John 12:23–36 is that the connection between Jesus' death and the life of the believing community is repeatedly stressed. The faith community consists of those who redefine the meaning of life on the basis of Jesus' death (vv. 24–26). The faith community is the fruit of Jesus' death; it is what shows forth Jesus' love to the world (see also 13:34–35). It is the transformative potential of Jesus' death for those who believe that leads to the repeated expressions of temporal urgency in 12:23–36. It is critical to believe in Jesus so that one can share in the gift of his life—the gift that leads to eternal life, to the confident assurance of God's and Jesus' abiding presence.

A strong note of tension and judgment is implicit in this urgency, because for Jesus' death to effect reconciliation with God one must make the decision to believe in Jesus. That is, Jesus' death offers reconciliation to all people, but one must decide to accept this offer. This element of tension is lacking in all of the dominant theologies of atonement, and, as a result, the balance between the human and the divine is skewed. That is, there is a tendency for discussions of atonement to favor either the side of divine initiative (ransom, sacrifice) or of human embrace of God's love (moral influence), but in the Fourth Gospel, the focus remains steadfastly on the inseparable interrelationship of the divine and human, an interrelationship that is most fully expressed in the incarnation.

At the heart of the Johannine understanding of the death of Jesus is the recognition that it is of a piece with the life of Jesus. Jesus' death is an expression of his relationship with God, which began "at the beginning." For the Fourth Gospel, then, a theology of reconciliation does not focus exclusively on the death of Jesus, but on the incarnation itself—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—and on the interrelationship of God and Jesus in love that the incarnation reveals.

The Fourth Gospel, then, makes two important contributions to the ongoing conversation about reconciliation. First, it suggests a way of understanding reconciliation that takes relationship as a serious theological category. Jesus' death is the ultimate expression of his relationship to God and to his own people (10:16–18). The decision to believe is the decision to become a partner in that relationship, to become a member of a community that is bound to God and Jesus as they are bound to each other, and whose relationship to one another is an extension of the God/Jesus relationship. Second, the Fourth Gospel insists on placing the incarnation as the starting point for any conversation about atonement and reconciliation and not isolating Jesus' death on the cross as the sole moment of reconciliation. Jesus' glorification, the events of his "hour," complete what began in the incarnation (cf. 12:28), but the incarnation itself is the locus of reconciliation.

Notes

John 12:20–36 This announcement of glorification by death is an illustration of “the whole world” (19) going after him.

John 12:20 **Greeks:** *Hellēnes* not used here in a nationalistic sense. John introduces us now to certain Greeks. Since these men had come up to worship, it is likely that they were “God-fearers.” They may have been proselytes, but if so they would scarcely have been described simply as “Greeks.” The “God-fearers” were people who were attracted by the lofty morality and the monotheism of Judaism, but who did not care to become full proselytes by circumcision. They might visit Jerusalem for the great feasts, but they could not pass beyond the court of the Gentiles when they went up to the Temple. These “Greeks” would not necessarily have come from Greece itself. There were many Greeks in Decapolis, for example, and they could have come from such a place. At Passover time worshippers came from widely scattered places throughout the Roman Empire to join in the festivity.

John 12:21–22 **Philip...Andrew:** the approach is made through disciples who have distinctly Greek names, suggesting that access to Jesus was mediated to the Greek world through his disciples. Philip and Andrew were from Bethsaida (Jn 1:44); Galileans were mostly bilingual. See: here seems to mean “have an interview with.”

John 12:23 Jesus’ response suggests that only after the crucifixion could the gospel encompass both Jew and Gentile.

John 12:24 This verse implies that through his death Jesus will be accessible to all. It remains just a grain of wheat: this saying is found in the synoptic triple and double traditions (Mk 8:35; Mt 16:25; Lk 9:24; Mt 10:39; Lk 17:33). John adds the phrases (Jn 12:25) in this world and for eternal life.

John 12:25 **His life:** the Greek word *psychē* refers to a person’s natural life. It does not mean “soul,” for Hebrew anthropology did not postulate body/soul dualism in the way that is familiar to us.

John 12:27 **I am troubled:** perhaps an allusion to the Gethsemane agony scene of the synoptics.

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