

Exegesis

Vs. 20-22 – Unlike the Synoptics, who describe how Jesus cleanses the temple right after the Triumphal Entry (cf. Matt. 21:12-17; Mar. 11:15-19; Lu. 19:45-46), John chooses to relay a scene where Jesus gets some *foreign* visitors.¹ He tells us, “And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: and again Andrew and Philip tell Jesus.” The word “Greek,” like the designation gentile, was a general term that referred to non-Jewish people, not just those who might’ve hailed from Greece.² Josephus actually mentions that a lot of gentiles were interested in Jewish feasts.³ This seems to have ranged from casual interest to actual religious devotion, even for those who had been proselytized by Judaism. And while there is some disagreement as to who these Greeks were, considering that they came to Jerusalem to “worship at the feast,” we can safely assume this group would’ve been known as “God-fearers,” non-Jews who had converted to Judaism.⁴

We’re told that the Greeks singled out one of Jesus’ disciples, Philip. The last time he was mentioned was in the “Feeding of the Five Thousand” episode where, when asked by Jesus where they should get food to feed so many, he famously replied, “Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little” (6:7). Philip, like Thomas, was a pragmatist whose faith needed to be tested and refined (cf. 6:6; 20:24-29).

It is unclear why John mentions Phillip’s hometown. Bethsaida was the closest Jewish settlement to the Decapolis, a collection of ten Greek cities. In fact, Galilee was one of the most Hellenized regions in Palestine.⁵ It was also the birthplace of Peter and Andrew (cf. 1:44),⁶ and, according to archeological evidence, it was situated on the northeastern shore of the Sea

¹ John may not have felt the need to describe another cleansing since he had already told of one that occurred early in Jesus’ ministry (cf. 2:13-22).

² Carson (1991), p. 436.

³ Klink (2016), p. 550.

⁴ Thompson (2015), p. 268, sees these Greeks as “Greek-speaking Jews” and so understands the phrase “there were Greeks among those who came to worship at the feast” to imply these were Hellenized Jews and not really foreigners (cf. Lu. 7:5; Ac. 8:27; 10). But, as Carson (1991), p. 436, points out, if John meant that, the term he would’ve used ‘Grecian Jews’ as in Ac 6:1. Thus, it is better to read it as “there were Greeks among those who [also] came to worship at the feast.” Along with Carson, Klink (2016), p. 550, Keener (2012), 2:871, Köstenberger (2008), p. 377, Kruse (2017), p. 309, and Morris (1995), p. 525, all favor this latter understanding of the phrase.

⁵ Köstenberger (2008), p. 378.

⁶ That is to say, where the brothers grew up. During the events of the gospels, we know that Peter lived in Capernaum (cf. Matt. 8:14-16).

of Galilee, where the Jordan River meets the large freshwater lake about two miles east of Capernaum.⁷ Did the Greeks know this about Phillip? It's possible. Or did Phillip's name give away his own Greek affiliation? He is, after all, one of two disciples with a Greek name (see *notes 1:43-44*).⁸ But many Jews possessed Greek names.⁹ So, certainty eludes us. Nonetheless, whatever the reason, John's point is that it wasn't only the Jews who wanted to "see Jesus;" the Greeks—i.e., non-Jews, gentiles, foreigners—wanted a good look at the Lord too. This illustrates, in real-time, that the whole world had indeed "gone after him" (cf. vs. 19).¹⁰ Jesus attracted Jews and gentiles alike like a magnet draws iron.

The Greek's request prompts Philip to tell Andrew, who then, together, go tell Jesus. Intriguingly, John goes out of his way to describe such a mundane task. This implies that there may have been some hesitation.¹¹ After all, before Jesus sent out the twelve, he had instructed them to not go "...into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mat. 10:5-6).¹² And though there are exceptions, Jesus' earthly ministry prioritized the Jewish world over the non-Jewish world (cf. Mat. 15:21-28).¹³ Thus, Philip may have been unsure if his master would've entertained such guests right after being hailed as the King of Israel, and so goes to Andrew first to get his opinion before heading to Jesus.

Vs. 23-24 – Interestingly, we're not told that Jesus ever did meet with the Greeks. Instead, John says that the Lord takes their arrival as a cue to begin his last public discourse, a lecture that will not stop until verse 36. And the Lord commences his final open-air teaching with a declaration: "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified." This decisive "hour" had been hinted at for some time (cf. 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 8:20), and the tolling of the bell came as the Greeks, for the first time in this account, entered the narrative. For John, the actual climax of

⁷ Sauter, Megan, "The Great Bethsaida Debate," March 9, 2020, *Biblical Archaeology Society*, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-places/the-great-bethsaida-debate/>, [accessed, March 8, 2023].

⁸ The other is Andrew, whose name means "manly." Phillip's name means "lover of horses." Nothing should be made of this observation. These names were so common in the first century that their etymological significance carries little exegetical weight. I found it interesting, so I relegate it to the footnotes for those who love useless information.

⁹ Morris (1995), p. 525; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 211.

¹⁰ Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark seems to make a similar point to John in his retelling of the cleansing of the temple as he relays that Jesus didn't only condemn how they made his Father's house into a "den of robbers" but, in contrast, it was supposed to be a "house of prayer for all the nations" (Mar. 11:17). If the veil which separated even the Jews was torn in two by Jesus' work on the cross (cf. Mar. 15:38) then so too is his sacrifice sufficient to welcome even Gentiles into the God's house.

¹¹ Carson (1991), p. 437.

¹² Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 211.

¹³ Kruse (2017), p. 310.

Jesus' public ministry was not the Triumphal Entry but the entry of foreigners into the stream of the gospel story.¹⁴ Paul's ministry to the gentiles finds its beginning right here (cf. Gal. 2:7-8). "From now until the passion 'the hour' is in immediate prospect (12:27; 13:1; 17:1)."¹⁵

Jesus then explains the meaning behind his declaration that the hour of his glorification "is come." He says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Using a farming metaphor, Jesus shows that the hour he would be glorified was the hour of his death. He'll signify the type of death in a moment (vs. 32-33), but here, he highlights how he'll bring life in death. This is the first of *two* paradoxes that Jesus will unpack.

A kernel ("corn") of wheat left in a silo does little good; as Jesus says, it remains "alone." But should it be planted (i.e., "fall into the ground"), it will "die" (which is to say it will be destroyed) and will transform into a wheat plant that produces multiple kernels of wheat—i.e., "much fruit." Along with corn, soybean, rice, potato, and cotton, wheat is classified as an HYV (high-yielding variety) today. And according to the Kansas Farm Bureau, there are around "50 kernels" in a single stalk of wheat and around 17,000 in a pound.¹⁶ Meaning wheat produces quite a bit, considering its small stature. So, even though the kernel of wheat is destroyed when it is sown, it becomes the catalyst for new life and reproduces itself fifty times over. In fact, one needs only ten-square feet to produce enough grain for a single loaf of bread.¹⁷

In light of that, we can better understand what Jesus hinted at. The Lord may be talking about his death, but he's framing it in terms of a high-yield grain that produces more high-yield grain. Paul will use this very metaphor in 1 Cor. 15:35-38 where he is defending the doctrine of the resurrection.¹⁸ His is a death leading to abundant life for many.¹⁹ As Ambrose, a fourth-century church father said,

¹⁴ Morris (1995), p. 526.

¹⁵ Carson (1991), p. 437.

¹⁶ General Editors, "Wheat Fun Fact Sheet," *Kansas Farm Bureau*, <https://www.kfb.org/WebsitePageFile/File/A4999F31-C619-4FB6-BF22-074DA6143FC1/WheatFunFactGuide.pdf>, [accessed, March 8, 2023].

¹⁷ Bonsall, Will, "Is There A Place For Wheat In Your Garden? Part 1," Spring 2010, *Main Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association*, <https://www.mofga.org/resources/gardening/wheat/>, [accessed March 8, 2023].

¹⁸ Keener (2012), 2:873.

¹⁹ Carson (1991), p. 438, "Like the seed whose death is the germination of life for a great crop, so Jesus' death generates a plentiful harvest."

“How many more wonders appear, if you examine each plant, noticing how the seed when laid in the earth, decays, and, if it did not die, would bear no fruit. But when it decays, by that very act of death, it rises up to bear fruit in greater abundance.”²⁰

After the *tragedy* on the cross came the *entombment* in the garden leading to the *triumph* of the resurrection and culminating in the *enthronement* in the heavens. And through Jesus' death, burial, revival, and reign, life is secured for all those who believe (cf. 3:15).²¹

Paradoxically, from death comes life. How many people have been given new life through Jesus' one-time sacrificial planting? "The farmer does not lose a seed but gains fruit, just as God the Father through the Son gains many children (1:12)."²²

Vs. 25-26 – Jesus explains how his death should be applied to the listening crowds by saying, "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honor." Herein is Jesus' other paradox: *loving* one's life leads to *losing* it, and *hating* one's life leads to *having* it. And in this, he's not telling us to hate our life whereby we bemoan our existence, throw it away without a thought, or regard it as meaningless. Life has immeasurable value. Jesus is using hyperbole. And his point is that we ought to have such an affection for the things of God that, by comparison, it appears as though we hate the things of this world. It is not that we actually hate the things of this world; we just *prefer* the things to come.²³ Amongst the many things we shouldn't prefer over the things of God, Jesus mentions explicitly riches (cf. Lu. 15:12-21), family (cf. Matt. 10:37-39) and, even our own lives (cf. Lu. 17:33).²⁴

The Lord contrasts self-aggrandizement—i.e., hubris—that leads to selfishness and self-preservation with a self-debasement—i.e., humility—that leads to selflessness and self-sacrifice. The prideful person loves themselves so much that they "serve" only their own interests and "follow" only their own intellect. And they will, above all, seek to save themselves from all harm. On the other hand, the lowly servant will "follow" the one they know is worthy even if they're led into harm's way. To borrow the farming metaphor, a kernel of wheat that does not give itself away will not experience the new kind of life that awaits in the soil, so it will have failed to understand its true nature and purpose.²⁵ But a kernel of wheat that does

²⁰ Elowsky, Joel C., *John 11-21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament IVb, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 60.

²¹ Morris (1995), p. 526.

²² Klink (2016), p. 552.

²³ Carson (1991), p. 439.

²⁴ Kruse (2017), p. 310.

²⁵ Klink (2016), p. 552.

understand its true nature and purpose will experience the new kind of life that awaits in the soil when it gives itself away. The person who denies himself "...chooses not to pander to self-interest but at the deepest level of his being declines to make himself the focus of his interest and perception, thereby *dying* [author's emphasis]." ²⁶

Furthermore, Jesus explains that wherever the servant is, the master is not far ("where I am, there shall also my servant be"). Considering that Jesus is still talking about his death, we can imply that to "serve," "follow," and "be" near Jesus means the servant will also partake in his master's death (cf. 11:16). But such a position is a place of distinction and fame, as Jesus says, "...if any man serve me, him will my Father honor." Working for the Son of God secures recognition from God (cf. 1 Sam. 2:30), especially when Christians give up their very lives in service to the gospel. In fact, it could be argued that one of the goals in living one's life for Christ is so that we might die well. How tragic would it be to spend our life on frivolous pursuits and not have anything to show for it in the life to come. As D.L. Moody put it, "Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter." All who go to their graves loving the Son will be honored by the Father.

²⁶ Carson (1991), p. 439.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 34

Text: John 12:20-26

Unlike the Synoptics, who describe how Jesus cleanses the temple right after the Triumphal Entry (cf. Matt. 21:12-17; Mar. 11:15-19; Lu. 19:45-46), John chooses to relay a scene where Jesus gets some *foreign* visitors. Some Greeks come and ask to "see Jesus." Interestingly, we're not told that Jesus ever did meet with the Greeks. Instead, John says that the Lord takes their arrival as a cue to begin his last public discourse, a lecture that will not stop until verse 36. And the Lord commences his final open-air teaching with a declaration: "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified." This decisive "hour" had been hinted at for some time (cf. 2:4; 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 8:20). And we should not miss the fact that the tolling of that bell, came as the Greeks, for the first time in this account, enter the narrative. For John, the actual climax of Jesus' public ministry was not the Triumphal Entry but the entry of foreigners into the stream of the gospel story.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: