

Chapter 12

The Gospel of John

We left Jesus last week with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They were gathered in their home, and Mary had anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume as if to prepare his body for burial. Clearly, on some level, Mary was aware of the fact that Jesus' life was in danger. The chief priests and others had decided that the raising of Lazarus from the dead was the last straw. His following would gather strength as the common people, impressed by the signs, began to believe in Jesus. The authorities had to act quickly before this possible attempt to make Jesus a king went too far. If it did, the Romans would quickly destroy them all because sedition against Roman rule was not tolerated.

John then observes that, because so many people came to Bethany to see not only Jesus but Lazarus as well, it would be prudent to include Lazarus as a target of assassination. Both of them had to go in order to protect the Jews from Roman wrath and destruction. John then shifts to the next day. There were great crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and somehow word got out that Jesus was going to enter the city. So, in order to welcome him in a way that identified Jesus as their king, they waved palm branches saying, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Moreover, as if to fulfill a prophesy from scripture, Jesus rode in on a donkey. A person who comes to bring peace rides a lowly animal. A person who comes to exercise power rides a horse.

As they enter the city, some Hellenized Jews who were Greek speakers asked to see Jesus. Jews apparently understood this request to indicate that the time for his passion had come. And he expresses the meaning of this by saying that if a grain of wheat falls into the ground and is buried, i.e., dies, then it bears much fruit. This expression refers, of course, to Jesus who, through his death and resurrection, brings salvation to others. However, it is also a reference to the fact that all who follow him go through a death and resurrection experience over time. Symbolized by Baptism, our old self dies and a new self is born in its place through the power of the spirit. The old self puts its faith in false gods, or in itself as a desire to be like God. Therefore, the old self knows nothing of the living God. It lives as if God does not even exist. In fact, because the old self has no faith, it cannot even "see" God. For the old self, God is dead. It simply obeys its own desires, inclinations, and passions.

However, since we were created "in the image and likeness of God" there is a remnant of this image left even as we live in alienation from God, i.e., in sin. This can be seen in the fact that we have some ability to recognize the universal moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. We "see" that it is wrong to murder, steal, lie, and commit adultery. We even—on some level—know there is a God. However, we prefer to live in denial because of the fact that, should we acknowledge so great an error, we are aware of how painfully wrong we are. Further, acknowledging that we do not live in relation to God brings with it the consciousness of death. From this, we recoil.

And so the Christian life does involve a process of death and new birth. But it is not a one-time thing. It happens whenever we have come to realize our need for repentance—our need to turn from our old ways and embrace the grace and love of God. This is the new birth: faith.

This leads Jesus to speak further of his own death. In doing so, his humanity also becomes visible. As a human being, he would prefer to avoid this death. However, being the Son of God and therefore also divine by nature, he remains faithful to the Father's will. It was for this—to die—that he came into the world. Jesus' mission is to overcome the human existential dilemma, the fact that we are bound by sin and death. We have no ability to do that ourselves because it takes divine power to give life in the midst of death. Only God can do that.

And so, Jesus must engage the reality of sin and death as a divine figure and a human figure--human in the sense that he really suffers and dies, divine in the sense that he has the power to overcome it. This puts the whole history of God in human events in perspective. It was all leading to this. God's intent from the beginning was to bring redemption to human life. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, this is precisely what He aims to do.

So while Jesus in his humanity would like to avoid going through this, Jesus as the divine Son of God knows he is here precisely to accomplish this.

Jesus goes on to express this by saying that the "ruler of the world will be driven out." That is, the power of evil that keeps humanity bound to sin and death will be eliminated by Jesus death and resurrection. Therefore, "I will draw all people to myself."

Because so many people disbelieve, John indicates that a prophesy of Isaiah is being fulfilled.

Chapter 12 concludes with Jesus' discourse on judgment. He did not come to judge. He came to save. We basically judge ourselves with our disbelief. For when life is offered to us and we reject it, then we're left with death by our own choice.

The next study: Chapter 13, The Last Supper according to John.