

“UNLESS A KERNEL OF WHEAT...”

John 12:20-50

Key Verse: 12:24

“Very truly I tell you, 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.”

This event takes place just before the Passover (12:1). It was the day Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king, riding on a donkey's colt (12:12-15). Many people welcomed him as the King of Israel because they had seen his power when he raised Lazarus from the dead. We cannot find such a king in this world. Those who are humble and gentle are usually weak. Those who have power are usually proud and cruel. Only Jesus is such a humble, gentle and powerful king. People expected that this glorious and powerful king would eliminate all their enemies and bring prosperity and peace that lasted forever. They never expected him to suffer and die. At this moment, Jesus foretold his death and explained its meaning. It was God's way for him to become the promised King who saves. Jesus taught this clearly so that people would believe in him and have eternal life. Jesus explained why his death was necessary by using the metaphor of a kernel of wheat. It sounds very earthy and poetic and people like it. But in reality it is difficult and painful to follow. We human beings love glory and honor, but don't want to suffer and die. Yet through Jesus' death, God's salvation was fulfilled. Let's consider the meaning of Jesus' death and how we can follow Jesus to gain true honor and glory.

First, Jesus glorifies God through his death (20-28a). It was the Passover. Though the Jews had celebrated the Passover annually for centuries, they didn't realize that it pointed to the Messiah's sacrificial death. At this time Jesus fulfilled the Passover by becoming the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). During the Passover, Jerusalem was filled with worshipers from all over Israel and even from other countries. Among them were some Greeks who feared God and converted to Judaism. Here “Greeks” is used in a cultural rather than geographical sense; they represent the Gentile world. They came to Philip with a request, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (21). Why did they want to see Jesus? They were seeking the One worthy of worship. They must have heard

about the signs that Jesus had performed, especially raising the dead. In truth, it was astounding news that caught their attention. Like everyone else, they desired eternal life. They thought Jesus could show them the way. They came to Philip, who had a fine Greek name. But Philip hesitated to bring them to Jesus. In a quandary, he asked Andrew what to do. Andrew, a man of faith and action, went straight to Jesus with Philip. The coming of the Greeks signified that the need for salvation through Jesus extended far beyond the Jews to the people of all nations. When Jesus heard this, his first words were, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (23). In John's gospel "the hour" is the climactic and defining moment of Jesus' life according to God's time schedule (2:4; 7:8,30; 8:20). It meant that he would die on the cross to save people of all nations. But Jesus did not say he would die; he said he would be glorified. Jesus indicates that the way of glory and victory is through the cross. This means that without death there is no glory. Jesus went on to explain the meaning of his death through the metaphor of the kernel of wheat.

Let's read verse 24. "Very truly I tell you, 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." At first glance, this principle is very obvious. A kernel of wheat has life potential to produce many seeds. But if we just keep the seed stored away somewhere it will never germinate and produce other seeds. Rather, it may be eaten by mice or birds. The only way the seed can produce is to be planted in the soil and die. Then it produces many seeds. How many seeds? One kernel of wheat can produce a stalk with 50 more kernels (year 1). If these 50 kernels are planted, they will produce 2,500 kernels (year 2), 125,000 (year 3), 6,250,000 (year 4), 312,500,000 (year 5). If we practice this principle wisely, we can feed the whole world. This principle also applies to individual people. Each person has great potential to impact the whole world in a good way. God has given each person gifts and talents that can be used to carry out a great purpose. But in order to do so, we should learn how to commit and fully devote ourselves to our vocation. Without commitment and devotion, nothing happens. This is true in every field: medicine, music, academics, business, and athletics. Sadly, many gifted people are wasting their lives, afraid to commit and devote themselves. But once a person does so, and experiences the blessing, they will continue.

Jesus not only taught the principle of the kernel of wheat, he practiced it in his own life. Though Jesus is God--infinite, eternal and almighty--he came into

the world as a human being. He was like a seed falling to the ground. Jesus fully devoted himself to the life-giving work of God. He taught the words of God which gave people meaning and purpose, and planted the kingdom of God in their hearts. He raised disciples through his humble service and constant prayer. He set a good example of living a meaningful and fruitful life. Ultimately he died on the cross for the sin of the world. Jesus' main point through this metaphor is to explain that his death was absolutely necessary. Why?

Since man committed sin, the relationship between the holy God and mankind was broken. Out of his great mercy, God opened a way through the sacrifice of animals. This anticipated Christ's sacrifice. However, animal blood is not sufficient to take away our sins. Neither can the blood of another sinner cleanse anyone from their sins. To take away our sins completely, only the sinless Son of God could be a sufficient sacrifice. There was no other way. Knowing this, Jesus willingly offered himself to obey God (Heb 10:7). By his one sacrifice Jesus paid the full price of our sins. Jesus opened a new and living way for us to come to God freely and have fellowship with him (Heb 10:19-20). Through Jesus' death, so many people have reconnected with God and received eternal life. Thank you, Jesus!

Though we are saved simply by believing what Jesus has done for us, he wants us to live like him. So, Jesus challenges us: "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (25). The greatest obstacle in following Jesus is loving one's own life most. In fact, this is sin. It is to put oneself in the place of God. In verse 25, "life" is repeated three times. The first two times it is from the Greek word "psyche," which refers to our lives in this world. The third time it is from the Greek word "zoe," which is eternal life. Jesus teaches how to use our life in this world. We only live once, and must decide between living for the glory of God or our own glory. To live for the glory of God requires that we "hate" our life in this world. What? Hate our life? It sounds like self-loathing. But that is not the meaning. It means to deny one's selfish desires and to live for the glory of God. Those who do so may engage in the same activities as others. They study, work, marry, play music and sports, eat and drink. But their purpose and motive are different. They do it all for the glory of God (1Co 10:31). Those who "love" their lives in this world live for their own glory. They will lose their lives. On the other hand, those who live for the glory of God will keep their lives forever. They are transformed from

self-centered to God-centered. It is paradoxical truth. Yet it is the way of life. Only those who practice this can understand.

Missionary Sarah Barry has lived for the glory of God based on John 12:24. This is why she gave up a princess life in Mississippi to serve as a missionary in the war-torn Korea of the 1950's-70's. She learned the language, ate the food and shared the sufferings and joys of Korean students. Mostly, she taught the Bible and prayed for them. She so devoted herself to Christ that she did not marry. God has used her life to produce so many spiritual fruits which have spread all over the world. When we ask her how she could live such a sacrificial life, she says, "I do not feel that I sacrificed. I gained Jesus and Jesus is everything." She encourages us to live for the glory of God.

After teaching us to live like him, Jesus gave us a great promise: "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be" (26a). Many people try to serve Jesus without following Jesus. They engage in Christian activities but do not commit themselves to Jesus. In truth, they are not disciples of Jesus. Those who truly follow Jesus experience sweet fellowship with Jesus. Jackie Pullinger went from England to Hong Kong as a missionary in 1966 with nothing but a few coins in her pocket. She came to a place called the "Walled City," which was filled with drugs, prostitution and gangs. She began to serve people one by one as opportunities arose. In that desolate, heart-breaking mission field, she said, "I just felt this incredible joy... whenever I was in there...."¹ It was from her fellowship with Jesus. Such fellowship comes to people who truly follow Jesus.

Moreover, Jesus said, "My Father will honor the one who serves me" (26b). This is a great promise. When we are honored by people at a graduation ceremony we feel like somebody. Yet human honor is fleeting. Only God's honor lasts forever (1Pe 2:24-25a). How wonderful to be honored by the Creator God! To St. Paul, this glory was beyond comparing with our sufferings (Ro 8:18).

Eternal glory is so valuable and precious. In order to obtain this, Jesus paid a high price. We can see how much he struggled before the cross. He said, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" (27a)

¹ <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2019/January-2019/Jackie-Pullinger-We-re-going-to-feel-stupid-for-eternity-if-we-waste-this-life>

This is John's version of Jesus' Gethsemane prayer. Jesus knew that his death was not an ordinary death, but a substitutionary sacrifice for the sin of the world. This responsibility was so heavy. To fulfill it, Jesus would be mocked, insulted and beaten severely. Finally he would be hung on a cross as the object of God's wrath toward human sin. His suffering was not only physical, but emotional and spiritual. He would be completely abandoned by God as the bearer of our sins. As a human being, Jesus wanted to avoid this terrible suffering and death. However, Jesus denied himself to obey God's will. He said, "No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour, Father, glorify your name!" (27b-28a) Jesus shows us that through prayer he could die for the glory of God. How much more should we pray to live and die for the glory of God.

Second, the impact of Jesus' death (28b-33). When Jesus obeyed God's will to the point of death, how did God respond? God's voice from heaven said, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" (28b). What does this mean? Jesus had glorified God through his incarnation and earthly ministry. He had revealed God in a way that led to the worship of God. For example, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he revealed the power and love of God upon a family that needed God's help. In response, Mary offered her treasure to Jesus in an act of worship. Jesus lived to glorify God in all that he did, large and small. God had accepted Jesus' life of service and was fully satisfied by Jesus' life. God would continue to glorify his name through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

The crowd's response to the voice was mixed: some said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him (29). They did not understand the voice. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine" (30). Then he told how his death would impact the world in two ways. First of all, through Jesus' death judgment came upon Satan, the prince of this world (31). When Jesus died on the cross, it seemed like Satan won the victory. However, God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Ac 2:24). It was a complete reversal, and it changed the destiny of mankind. Since mankind disobeyed God's command through Satan's temptation, they fell under the dominion of darkness (Col 1:13). The devil, Satan, held the power of death, as well as temptation and accusation, and used it to intimidate and torment people day and night (Heb 2:14-15; Rev 12:10b). However, by his death, Jesus defeated the power of sin and death which Satan had been using. In that moment, Satan lost his ground and was driven out.

Colossians 2:15 tells us what Jesus did. It says, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Through his death, Jesus won a great victory over the devil and liberates us from the dominion of darkness.

Secondly, through his death Jesus draws all people to himself. In verse 32 Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The phrase "lifted up" refers to Jesus' death on the cross (33). The phrase "all people" does not mean that every person will be saved. It means that people from every tribe, language and nation who believe in Jesus will be saved (Rev 5:9). Jesus' death was not only for the Jews, but for the whole world. Jesus is the Savior of the world (4:42). Anyone who trusts in Jesus and looks up to him will be saved, regardless of their human background. For example, when the gospel was preached at Pentecost, people from many nations accepted the message and were drawn to Jesus. And since then, people from all nations have steadily been drawn to Jesus. It is estimated that today, 2.4 billion people identify as Jesus' followers, which is nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of the world's population. We should know that Jesus' cross is still working powerfully to draw people to him.

Third, Jesus' invitation to the light and warning against unbelief (34-50). When the crowd heard Jesus say that he would die, they reacted: "How can you say 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?" (34) They did not want a suffering Messiah, but a glorious Messiah. According to Jesus, they were still in the darkness. Jesus challenged them: "Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you" (35b). Darkness has power. People cannot resist it with their own will. Yet Jesus' light is stronger. To dispel the darkness, we need to receive Jesus' light. In the darkness of unbelief, people did not know what they were doing, where they came from or where they were going. They were rebellious and desperate and became negative and fatalistic. Nevertheless, Jesus invited them to the light: "Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light" (36a). After saying all this, Jesus left and hid himself from them (36b).

In verses 37-43, the author comments on the unbelief of the Jews. Verse 37 says, "Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him." This tells us that their unbelief was intentional. The author explained that their unbelief fulfilled the words of Isaiah (38) and was

under the sovereign hand of God. Unbelief had blinded their spiritual eyes, hardened their hearts and made them lose the chance to be healed (39-40). They could not see Jesus' glory (41). Many, even among the leaders believed in him. But they would not acknowledge their faith openly because of fear. In truth, they loved human praise more than praise from God (42-43).

In verses 44-50 Jesus warns against unbelief. Jesus cried out. This tells us that Jesus had a broken heart for the unbelieving. Why is it so serious? Jesus said, "Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me" (44-45). Those who do not believe in Jesus do not believe in the true God. They remain in the darkness (46). Jesus did not come to judge the world. But his words will judge those who do not keep them (47-48). Jesus' words are God's words (49). His word is true and gives eternal life to those who keep it (50).

In light of Jesus' teaching, I reflected on whether I have lived as a kernel of wheat. By God's grace, he called me out of darkness and into his wonderful light as a college student. He gave me a clear purpose to live as a pastor and a vision to be a messenger of God's word. Accordingly, he trained me, through his servant Dr. Samuel Lee, and also directly. Without going into detail, I can say that the training was so intense that my wife and children rarely saw me during the week and not at all on weekends. Honestly, it was painful and difficult. But through it all, the Lord has been my comfort, strength and guide. And he is accomplishing his own purpose. Often, when I travel, UBF people approach me and comment that they have received grace through listening to my messages. When I visited Sudan in 2003, a man named Gema Wutong heard my message on Acts 1. He said nothing at the time. But last year he called me and said, "Father Ron, you commanded me to be a shepherd. I have been living as a shepherd." He is serving the Lord with Sudanese refugees. I believe God is bearing fruit through me. At the same time, I know that the desire for self-glory still resides in me. Based on Galatians 2:20, I pray to die with Christ and live with Christ until his love alone remains in me.

Today Jesus has taught the meaning of his death. Like a kernel of wheat, he fell to the ground and died on the cross. His death became the fountain of life for all who believe in him. We have eternal life through believing in Jesus. Let's follow his footsteps and live for the glory of God like a kernel of wheat.