

## A Storytelling Commentary on John 12:20-33

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This is a major turning point in the Gospel. It is the first time in the entire Gospel in which Greeks have even been present in the Gospel. After the triumphal entry in which the great crowd greets him as the King of Israel, some Greeks, probably Gentiles, came to Philip and asked to see Jesus. When Jesus hears that these Greeks want to speak to him, he knows that it is the end and says, "Now the hour has come." In the story, he never speaks to them. He never speaks to anyone other than Jews in the Gospel of John. At several points in the Gospel up to this point he has said, "My hour has not yet come." The first time he said this was to his mother at the wedding at Cana.

The metaphor of the grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying presupposed the ancient belief that when a seed falls into the ground, it dies. When it is planted, it dies and then is brought back to life in a new form of a plant. Jesus is saying that if a grain of wheat isn't planted, then it does nothing and remains alone. It is just a single grain and it stays that. But if it's planted, then it dies and brings forth a plant that yields grain. It bears fruit only by dying. That metaphor is used to explain his death; by dying he will bring forth great fruit.

The focus of Jesus' address is his followers because those who love their life will lose it. Why? Because they hold on to life and like a grain, stay alone. Those who hate their life in this world and are willing to die for the kingdom of God will keep it for eternity. So also, the servant is one who follows him and does what he does, namely, being willing to die for the kingdom of God.

The trouble around this is of course facing the reality of his death and he names that, "my soul is troubled." His response is in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus at Gethsemane is in agony and asks that God save him. Here he says that it is for this reason that he has come. There is a way in which this story in John is told against the story in the Synoptics, that they didn't get it right. In John, Jesus was not in agony about his coming death and passion; rather, he knew it, he affirmed it, and he resisted any temptation *not* to affirm this death for the sake of the kingdom of God.

God's voice, then, is a confirmation of Jesus' prayer. "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again." It is, on the one hand, a consolation from God to Jesus. But Jesus identifies God's voice when the crowd hears it as being not for *himself*, but for *them*, so that they may know that it is truly the will of God that he suffer and die. And why? It is for the judgment of this world and to drive out the ruler of this world by reorganizing the structure of power in this world. By his death, he will draw everyone to himself and thereby drive out the spirit of hatred and enmity, of warfare that the ruler of this world uses to maintain power over the world. *That* is the rule of the powers of evil.

There is also a prophecy of his death. "When I am lifted up from the earth"—that is, when I am crucified, when I am lifted up on the tree—"then I will draw all people to myself." This was an indication of the kind of death he was going to die. It is another one of the implicit passion prophecies that are present in the Gospel of John. It is a foretelling of his crucifixion and it is for the sake of the listeners so that they are not shocked and do not decide that because Jesus was crucified that he cannot be the Messiah. This was the dominant conclusion in the first century. The Messiah cannot be crucified. If he was crucified, then he's not the Messiah. Jesus' prophetic words here are a way of entering into that discussion and of affirming that his death on the cross is not only a sign that he is the Messiah, it is THE way that he will redeem the world and draw all people to himself.