



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 12: 20-26

Winter 2023

"Dying To Live"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. Good to be back with you on this LORD's day and continue our studies in the Gospel of John. We're in chapter 12. We've been in it for a couple of weeks and we're going to look this morning at verses 20 through 26.

The Lord has entered Jerusalem; and this is the last week of His life. He is there to celebrate the Passover and He was accompanied by multitudes who were singing praise and "Hosannas" to Him, calling Him "The King of Israel." (vs13).

And now we read in verse 20,

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; ²¹ these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and *began* to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. ²⁶ If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

John 12: 20-26

May the LORD bless our time of study in this great passage, illuminate our minds, and apply this text to us. And let us pray for that and pray for our brothers and sisters in need. Let's bow our heads.

Father, we do thank You for this hour together and this opportunity to study a great text of Scripture like this, and consider its meaning and the challenges that it presents to us. We bring this before You because we pray that You would bless us, that You would give us understanding, and that You would make the applications clear to us. The passage is challenging and I pray that we would understand the challenge; and that we would seek to engage in it.

But we can only do that successfully by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we pray for His ministry within us. May He open our minds to the truth, may we understand what we've read, and may we desire to live according to the instruction the LORD has given. We commend that to You and pray You'd bless it.

Bless the ministries that have gone on already this morning; Chris and Allen and Mike and the younger classes that have been taught, I pray that the seeds that have been sown would bear fruit in our live—and that that would be the case this morning as well, in this hour.

And LORD we pray for our spiritual condition and our spiritual needs, but we must also pray for those who have physical needs. And we all have that, but some are going through a particular difficult time now, great challenges, and we pray for them. There are great advances in medicine, and that's all through Your providence, LORD. You've blessed us with helps that in past years people didn't have, and You're the One that can and does give health and life. We live and we move and we exist in You. As Daniel said, and others have said, 'You give us every breath of life that we take.' It comes from You.

LORD, we pray that all of this will be to Your glory, and that we will be to Your glory—and we will do that as we follow Your Word and live in obedience to it. So may that be the consequence of our time together this morning.

Bless us now. Prepare our hearts for a time of study and worship together, and we look to You to do that. In Christ's name, Amen.

(Message) When someone or something causes a change in the direction of things, it's called a *'pivotal moment'*. The Germans have a specific word for that, which translates into *'turning point'*. It's an event that signifies a shift in direction; in sports, and history, and relationships—relationships with one another or relationships between nations. A whole game can change on one play; the Battle of Gettysburg was a pivotal moment in American history; the day you met your wife is the day your life changed.

John 12 records a pivotal moment in the life of Christ, one that signaled a shift in things, when the Greeks came *'asking to see Jesus.'* (vs21). When the Lord learned of it, He said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (vs23). And that hour would be the pivotal moment of human history, for the cross divides the ages.

It happened in Jerusalem. Jesus was there to celebrate the Passover and multitudes were there. Among them, John wrote in verse 20, "...were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast." Now that seems unusual. They may have come from Athens or from a Greek speaking city in the surrounding region, such as Decapolis, just east of the Sea of Galilee, or perhaps Damascus to the north.

And since John identifies them as Greeks, they were probably *'God fearers'*, which is the term that referred to Gentiles who had not actually converted to Judaism but were attracted to it. People like the Roman centurion in Capernaum in Luke chapter 7, who loved the Jewish people and built the synagogue for them. Or the Centurion Cornelius in Acts chapter 10, a man described as, "one who feared God." (vs2).

These were people who had become disillusioned with Gentile religion and thought. They found Greek philosophy empty and pagan religion foolish. They were drawn to the light in Judaism—to its monotheism and morality. They could visit

Jerusalem for the great feasts; and while they couldn't enter the temple, they could stand in the large Court of the Gentiles and observe the ceremonies.

These particular Greeks had joined the Jewish pilgrims to worship at Jerusalem, and while there, something happened to draw them to Christ. Maybe it was when He entered the city from the Mount of Olives with the pilgrims crying out "Hosanna!" and hailing Jesus as the Lord, even "The King of Israel."

The next day, Mark wrote in his Gospel, Jesus entered the temple and cleansed it. He drove out the merchants; He turned over the tables of the money changers; and He quoted Isaiah 56, verse 7, "Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a robbers' den." (Mar 11:17). Maybe they witnessed that and they heard Him express concern for the nations, the Gentiles, the Greeks, and they were drawn to Him.

Whatever it was, whatever the reason, they wanted to meet Jesus, and approached Phillip with their request. "Sir," they said, "we wish to see Jesus." (v21). Phillip is a Greek name, and that may have been the reason that they made their connection with him. But Phillip was hesitant to go to Christ. The text doesn't say why, but maybe he recalled the Lord's statement to the Canaanite woman, that He had been "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel", (Mat 16:24), and felt that an interview with the Greeks would be improper.

So instead, Phillip went to Andrew, and together they told the Lord that there were some Gentiles who wanted to see Him. Well we might assume that He did meet with them, but we're not told that He did. That's not stated. What is reported is the response from Christ that the Greeks triggered in Him. At a time when the Jewish people and their leaders would reject Him, ("He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." (Jn 1:11)), and at that the same time the Gentiles were seeking Him, He saw in that fact, in that event in what was reported to Him, something very significant. In fact, in verse 27, He said 'His soul was troubled'. The coming of the Greeks signaled a change was occurring, that His ministry would soon conclude, and salvation would be offered to the Gentiles, as well as to the Jews.

A day or two before, the Pharisees had looked with alarm at the crowds coming over the Mount of Olives and into the city and the people's excitement over Jesus when He entered Jerusalem, and they said, "The world has gone after Him." (vs19b). And now that was happening; Greeks were coming to Him. So Jesus answered, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (vs23).

We're familiar with that word, 'the hour'. All through the Gospel we have read about, 'the hour, that it had not come.' In chapter 2, Jesus told His mother, "My hour has not yet come." In chapter 7, verse 44, men tried to seize Him, and no man laid a hand on Him because 'His hour had not yet come.' Then, in chapter 8, "...no one seized Him because His hour had not yet come." (vs20).

But now it has come. It was time for the Son of Man to be glorified—but not as His disciples were anticipating; that the time had arrived when He would be placed on the throne of David and rule over Israel and all of the world. No, the Lord meant that 'the hour had come' for Him to be placed on the cross of Calvary. It was time for His death, His resurrection, and ascension. But principally, He's referring here to His death.

Death doesn't seem like glorification, especially the kind of death that He died, that of crucifixion. It was a shameful, painful death. But that was His hour; and in it glory would be displayed in the shame of it all. In fact, the glory of God could not be seen more clearly, more majestically than it is seen in the cross of Christ. There the attributes of God were demonstrated and manifested. There is seen God's inflexible righteousness and justice when He punished sin in our substitute—justice that would not even spare His own Son. There's no compromise in the Lord God.

But there also, and equally, we see God's infinite love in a sacrifice so great for us who are so unworthy of it. "While we were yet sinners," Paul wrote in Romans 5, verse 8, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." When we were helpless, He saved us. That's how He demonstrated His love for us.

And there we see the power of God through the weakness of the cross, through this passive suffering of His because through the cross He reconciled sinners to Himself. There He ended the war and He made peace with man. Christ's death was no defeat; it was a victory because at the cross, God's justice and love met in our substitute to satisfy the demands the broken Law and saved us from the penalty of that broken Law.

And for Christ...that was a *willing* sacrifice that He made; and that is so essential to know. He was in control of this. From the moment He comes into this world to the day He dismissed His spirit from the cross, Christ died willingly. He who is the eternal Son of God, our Creator, very God of very God, perfect and powerful, humbled Himself so much for us, suffered so much for us, that His glory is seen in His refusal to seek His own glory, to seek His own personal welfare as we count it, and instead willingly died for us. It was a pivotal moment for the world, a turning point, the great turning point. Everything changed; He saved His people, an innumerable multitude, and defeated the devil, (the god of this world).

And now time is moving toward the kingdom to come; this is the age of grace. It's the time, the age, when God is bringing His people to Himself. He's gathering them through the work of the Holy Spirit who is applying the merits of the cross to those God has chosen. And as a result, now, as Paul tells us so encouragingly in Romans 8, verse 37, because of the cross, because of what Christ has done, "We are more than conquerors." That's how we're to live our life. That's how we are to see our life—because of what He did on the cross; what took place there—which was no defeat but a great victory, we are the conquerors, daily.

Now, the necessity of His death, and the results of it, are illustrated by our Lord in verse 24 from what would have been a very common scene to the disciples, that of sowing seed and reaping a harvest. Jesus said in verse 24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone..." It's unfruitful.

It's just there. "...but if it dies, it bears much fruit." A grain of wheat can exist by itself, kept in a sack, or stored up. But it cannot both *be*, and be fruitful. To become fruitful, it cannot *be*, it must die. It must fall to the ground and germinate in order to reproduce itself. So in agriculture, the principle holds that, 'For there to be life, there must first be death.'

And that was true of our Lord. Was there another way to gain our salvation? Could another path have been taken, (that is, the way of the cross), to enter into God's kingdom? That was really something of the searching question that Jesus utters in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Is there another way?' And the answer to that is, 'No.' There is no other way to life for the sinner except through the cross of Christ. "Truly, truly," the Lord said, 'The only way to fruitfulness, to life that is eternal, is through death.' Because only by another taking our place in judgment, could God be satisfied—His justice, His perfect justice satisfied and we become acceptable to Him. Life, spiritual life, eternal life, comes by death.

And the Lord goes on to apply that principle to us, though not in precisely the same way that it happened to Him. Christ's death is unique. He is unique. Only His death could produce what it did. It alone is redemptive. It alone is saving. But still, His death is an example for us. It was the supreme act of self-denial. And that is the only way for us to have real life, abundant life, life that is satisfying and fruitful—by denying self.

And so He says, "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal." (vs25). 'The only way to keep what you want the most is to lose it.' 'The way to save what you love the most is to hate it.' It seems like a paradox, doesn't it?

It isn't, of course. The *life* He is speaking of is actually the soul, the *psyché*, which is the core of person's being; his or her mind, and will, and affections. And in this context, it is the soul that is alienated from God; going its own way in its own thoughts, and desires, and plans. And that, the Lord said, 'Is to be hated'. In order to live spiritually, eternally, the life of independence from God must die.

Instead of seeking self-interest, a person must submit to God's sovereign rights over him, (or over her), life. And that holds true from beginning to end. To receive salvation, the salvation that Christ has gained for His people on the cross, you, we, must not go our own way; we must hate that. We must disavow that and we must submit to the Gospel, the Good News of salvation in Christ through faith alone.

That means renouncing what you are; seeing yourself and what you really are: A sinner and undeserving; lost and ruined by the fall, and without any merit of your own. See yourself in the condition that Isaiah described us to be in when he wrote that, "All our righteous deeds are like filthy garments." (Isa 64:6); and that, is an abomination to the world.

Now I didn't say it, Isaiah said it, long ago; "Every righteous deed", the best things that you and I can produce in our flesh, in our own strength, are worthless! In fact, worse than worthless, they are worthy only of being thrown away. That's what we are, in and of ourselves, left to ourselves, outside of grace. We're like a withered leaf—lifeless and useless.

When people understand that, they do hate a life in rebellion against God and repent of it—even of their best deeds, their religious and moral deeds done in self-righteousness. That happens when we recognize that nothing that they can do, we can do, or be, matches up to the perfect standard of righteousness that is God's. That's the standard that we must reach.

And realizing that, a person casts himself or herself on the mercy of God and believe in Christ, and in Him alone. That's when a person receives the forgiveness of sin—the righteousness of Christ imputed to him or her. God looks upon you as having all your sins paid for and all the righteousness of the Law accomplished; and you receive life eternal, which every believer has at the moment of faith in Christ—has it then, and forever. It's a new life. It's God's life, in which we are made able to live to Him and die to ourselves, and live in submission to Christ, who is our head, our leader, our guide.

But that really is the struggle that we face as Christians every day, seeking Christ's interests over our own interest. Humbling self rather than elevating self. That's a daily

struggle. That is, though, what we're called to do. And it's only in that way that we experience the fullness of life and the power of God—and life as it should be lived.

George Müller is an example of that—he was a remarkable man. I've referred to him many times, Dr. Johnson referred to him many times. A man who accomplished a great deal, a man of prayer who established orphanages in England and kept them running by the grace of God—by daily trusting in the LORD.

When he was asked the secret of his service he said, "There was a day when I died." And as he spoke, he bent lower and added, "...died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censor; died to the approval or blame of my brethren or friends. And since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."

Now that's an example of a *pivotal moment*, but it's a moment that is never once and for all. As Müller said, "He studied only to show himself approved of God." That's what he worked at, that's what he lived to do. It's never a 'once for all thing'.

Now saving faith is—that moment marks the great change of direction in a person's life, when he or she, through faith, is *justified*, 'declared righteous' by God. That's at a moment in time, and that's forever.

But we must do what Müller did daily. As Christians we die daily in order to live well, in order to live obediently. We continually crucify our flesh, pick up our cross, and follow Christ. We stumble, and we get up, and we go forward...and we stumble, and we get up, and go forward. Living for Him, though, is the great challenge we face, isn't it? It's what we face every day, every moment. We should, at least.

So how do we get the attitude that Christ is speaking of here? How do we get the proper attitude of having Him as the priority of our life? How do we get our focus off ourselves, (which is so important to us), and off our own interests? Well, I think the Greeks of verses 20 and 21 give us the example and answer when they said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Seeing Him, seeing His glory is the best way to give us love for Him,

a desire to please Him, and live for Him; rather than live for self. It's the best way to change our attitude—so that's what we want to do.

Now we don't do that with some 'beatific vision', by seeking some 'mystical connection' with Him. Rather we see Him simply in the Scriptures; here He is always available to us and that's where we learn of Him; learn of His love for us, learn of His gracious and kind character. That's where we see Him receiving sinners and having compassion on the sick and afflicted. That's where we learn of His greatness, His deity, and how He left the glory and joy of heaven, the bliss of heaven, to become a man in this fallen world—and to be a servant; and serve us sinners in rebellion against Him.

Studying Christ, and seeing Him in the Scriptures, is the most practical habit of life. It actually changes us—that's what the Scriptures teach: 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18, Paul wrote that by, "beholding the glory of the Lord", (that is, seeing Him in the Scriptures as He is presented to us), by "beholding the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory." You see in that that there's a progressive change, "from glory to glory"; and as we see Him in the Scriptures, we take on His image.

What we study has an effect upon us, (and I say that just generally). Often we become like the people we study—good or bad. If Christ is who you want to see, you will become like Him as you see Him. But with Him, it is a supernatural process. The Holy Spirit transforms us into His image; to have His mind and to have love for Him. And it's a supernatural process. Through the Word of God, the Spirit of God transforms us into the very one we're studying and reflecting upon—over time—"from glory to glory". And the natural outcome of that, (of love for Christ), is dying to self—denying self, following Christ and serving Him. That's verse 26, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me." Every child of God is a servant. The greatest in the church have been servants of all.

But service is not first in importance. We tend to think of it like that, and measure the vitality of the Christian life by the amount of work that is done. But before doing the work of teaching, or evangelism, or doing good works, we are first to follow Christ. "If anyone serves Me," He said, "he must follow Me." He is the pattern of our

lives. His life is our 'law', and we are to imitate Him—that's what God honors; that's what prospers. That's the life and the service that imitates Christ, that follows Him.

And not just in actions. As we study Him, we're not only changed in our behavior, but in our attitude—fundamentally. That's what changes, and what's necessary to change, because following Christ doesn't simply mean following a pattern and an example, but following a person. And that involves a relationship.

In the first chapter of this Gospel, the Lord went into Galilee and He called His disciples and said, "Follow Me", (vs43),—and they followed Him. From then on they lived with Him. They went where He went. They did what He did. They ate what He ate, slept where He slept, listened to Him, spoke to Him—they had fellowship with Him. And that's what "following Him" involves: Obedience in a personal relationship; and through it we learn about Him, increasingly come to know Him, experience His faithfulness in our lives, and want to serve Him and seek opportunities to do that.

M'Cheyne called it "experimental acquaintance": 'Personal experience with Christ.' The more we know Him, the more we want to be like Him, and to obey Him. And in obeying Him, experience Him in our life. The more we know Him, the more we will then follow Him. Not out of compulsion, but out of a desire, because we love Him. And as we do that, He leads us in His way, "in the paths of righteousness", as Psalm 23, (verse 3), puts it. Or as the Lord says here, "Where I am, there My servant will be also." (vs26b).

Now, that's a life-long pursuit. This 'experimental acquaintance', as M'Cheyne put it, is a life-long pursuit and relationship with Christ. There's not a single pivotal moment in it, there are many such moments. Conversion is a single moment. The Christian life is a process. It involves obedience, it involves failure, progress and regress, humble service and public confession of faith that may produce ridicule.

In fact, it will produce ridicule and that can be hard. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God," Paul told a small group of young Christians in Lystra, (Acts 14:22), (and he told them that after having been stoned there and left for

dead). Believers can hesitate over that; they can stumble over that; that fear of going through difficulties, and rejection, and persecution. So self-denial is not easy—in fact it's impossible, apart from the sovereign grace of God.

But what we must do is what the Greeks wanted to do, “See Jesus.” Seeing His glory changes us, strengthens us. Again, that transformation is supernatural. It is a work that occurs through the Scriptures: As we study God's Word, the Holy Spirit nourishes us, and trains us, and transforms us from it, (from the Word of God).

But also notice there is incentive to do this, to be where Christ is, to follow and be faithful. Jesus said, "If anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." (vs26c). F. F. Bruce wrote, "For the servant to follow the master means to share the master's suffering; but it also means to share the master's glory."

Spurgeon illustrated that by imagining a situation in which a prince along with his servant are shipwrecked on a voyage, and they fall into the hands of barbarians. The servant has an opportunity to escape, but instead chose to stay with his master. Things only got worse. The prince was thrown into a dungeon, but the servant stayed with him, and waited on him. The prince became sick with a contagious fever, but the servant cared for him, gave him cool water to drink, and nursed him to health. In their extreme poverty, they shared their last crust of bread together.

Finally, after a long ordeal, the prince was found and rescued. Spurgeon asked, "Who is the man whom the king will delight to honor? Well, obviously the servant, 'For,' said the king, 'this is the man who was with my son in prison. He was with my son when he was near death. He nursed him, suffered with him. He was reproached for him.' In fact, the king would look on the poor servant with greater affection than he would on the greatest statesman, and honor him above all the mighty in the king's realm."

Well, that's imagination on Spurgeon's part, but we have the reality of Moses' life. It's set forth for us in Hebrews 11, where the writer names him as one of the great men of faith—and he was. It's an amazing brief biography that he gives of Moses:

A prince in Egypt, raised in the household of Pharaoh. He lived a charmed life. He lived the palace life. He had the best the world could offer; wealth and education, and the opportunity for worldly greatness. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, making him, some have suggested, heir to the throne of Egypt.

But there came a moment when he turned his back on all of that. In the words of the writer, "He refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin." (Heb 11:24-25).

Had he chosen pleasure over hardship, the world over Christ, he might have ascended to the throne of Egypt—and maybe there would be a footnote in a history book on a Pharaoh named Amun-Moses.

But the world would know 'Moses the Lawgiver', the 'man of God', (Deu 33:1), the 'man of faith', 'the meekest man on the face of the earth', (Num 12:3). Because he chose the LORD and His people over the riches and pleasures of the world, God honored him with a name here in this world—and glory for all eternity. He "was looking to the reward," the author of Hebrews says. (Heb11:26). The Father will reward the faithful servant.

But it's not so much the rewards that drives the servant to faithfulness in the Lord—but love for Him, love for the Master, love for the Lord. And that comes with growth. Again, it is a life-long process. It's all about knowing the Lord—and to know Him we must see Him as those Greeks sought to do. The more we see Him, the more we will know Him, and love Him, and glorify Him in the way we live our lives as servants in this world.

But for us to do that we must, first of all, believe in Him as the Son of God and the Savior of sinners. —And that becomes *the pivotal moment* in a person's life. We began with that phrase. We'll end with it, because there will be one of two responses to Christ and the offer of salvation: One of faith, one of belief, or one of disbelief. Either one is a pivotal moment.

Shakespeare wrote of opportunity taken and opportunity missed. "Taken," he says, "it leads on to fortune. Missed, omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and misery." Don't omit. Don't miss. Don't reject the opportunity for salvation. —It's offered to all; turn to Christ; trust in Him. Receive from Him forgiveness and life everlasting. May God help you to do that, and enter in to new life, eternal life, and serve Him.

Father, that's what we are: 'We're debtors to mercy alone.' We who know You certainly know that. Salvation is not deserved—judgment is. But You chose to save "a multitude of people", far more than we can count or have any concept of. Your mercy is vast in its breadth and deep in its love for us that it would save sinners. We are debtors to Your mercy and give You thanks for that; and pray LORD, that we come to understand that more and more because as we do, we will understand the work of salvation, the cost of it all, and appreciate it more, and love You more for it. That's what we desire. Help us to seek You, to see You, and to love You more.

And now, Father, we ask Your blessing: The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

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