

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Studies in John's Gospel: The Passover Week - John 12

Our talk this morning concerns John 12 and concludes the series on the middle chapters of John's Gospel. Sometimes, when we read stories from the four Gospels, it is not always clear where, and when, the events happened. This is not so with the passage we have before us, as the first verse locates the scene, both its place in the Jewish calendar and its position in the land of Israel. "Then Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead." The implications of the miracle, that was outlined in the previous chapter and which was the subject of last week's *Truth for Today* broadcast, are continued into the events that make up our chapter today. We can see this by John's mention of the fact of Lazarus, being at Bethany, even though he had once been dead. The raising of Lazarus, after being in the grave for four days, forces the issue of the identity of Jesus before us, as it did for the people around Jerusalem in that Passover week. Belief in Him is the main burden of our passage this morning.

From the verse we have just quoted, we know that the event described in the following nine verses occurred just before the Passover celebrations, a major event in the Jewish year. The village, called Bethany, was about two miles from Jerusalem, where thousands of Jews would assemble to celebrate the escape, or exodus, from Egypt in the time of Moses. The population surge, caused by the imminence of the celebrations in the city of Jerusalem, is an important feature of a later event in the chapter, but first we shall consider the supper that was made for Jesus at Bethany.

To set the scene for this I will read 12:2-3. "There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment." The three persons mentioned here, as being at the supper with the Lord Jesus, were brother and sisters, as we learned from chapter 11. There is an abundance of allegorical meanings in these verses if we are comfortable with such references. Lazarus would speak of the communion enjoyed by those who have the knowledge of the new life as given by Jesus, Martha is content now in her service, rather than complaining as she did in Luke 10:40. Mary is a beautiful picture of one who worships the Saviour by pouring out the precious ointment, in appreciation of His loving concern, and immense power, in raising Lazarus from the dead.

We must remember that the Lord would have been reclining at the table and not seated as we do today. Therefore, it would have been possible for Mary to reach the feet of the Lord without having to scramble under the table. We must also remind ourselves that even though it was easy to reach Him, pouring out the ointment was still a costly act, both in terms of money and personal humility. The value of the offering was approximately a year's wages for a typical workman, and could have represented the life savings of Mary. It was, therefore, no light matter to pour this out upon the feet of Jesus. The question comes before each one of us this morning as to whether we follow the example of these three persons. Do we enjoy communion and fellowship with the Lord? Do we seek to serve Him without complaint or grumbling? Do we bow in worship and thanksgiving to Him as the Spirit brings before us the glory of His person, as the well-loved Son of God, and something of His great redeeming death and resurrection? These stories, on the pages of the Bible, should have an effect upon our lives if we are believers in Jesus.

From verses 4 and 5 we learn that Judas Iscariot soon picked up on what he considered was a financial waste, claiming that the ointment should have been sold to raise money for the poor. This is an accusation that is still levelled at some Christians. When a church or fellowship of Christians embarks upon some particular project, whether it be a new building or renovating an existing structure, criticisms can be made, often by those not involved, that the money could be used to the benefit of the poor in the third world. It is so easy to spend other people's money! Prayer, Scripture and sanctified common sense should guide those whose lives are governed by belief in Jesus.

Verses 7 and 8 of our passage reveal to us the Lord's appreciation of Mary's actions. "Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always." It would seem from this statement that Mary had an intimation that the end was near for the Lord and also that He would conquer death, though whether she understood that His resurrection would occur as soon as it did is doubtful. I would judge that she was convinced that just as her brother was raised then the body of the Lord Jesus would not stay forever in the grave. The pot of ointment was, quite probably, originally destined for the dead body of Jesus; now her devotion causes her to anoint Him while He lived.

Verse 9 shows how the crisis deepened as the chief priests' hostility increased. "Much people of the Jews therefore knew that he was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead." The crowd increased as natural curiosity caused more to come to Bethany to see the man that had been in the grave for nearly a week. This interest was transferred to Jesus, and verse 11 confirms that, because of Lazarus, many of the Jews believed in Jesus. A state of affairs had now come about that, as far as the chief priests were concerned, could only be solved by the death of Jesus. Again I feel compelled to ask the question that all of us need to answer as we listen to this broadcast. Do we believe in Jesus?

The next event in the life of Jesus, recorded for us in John 12, is the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, popularly known today as Palm Sunday. John tells us that two separate groups were there: one, as we have just read, came to see Jesus and Lazarus, and the other was present for the Feast at Jerusalem. These two crowds mingled to witness the Lord riding into Jerusalem upon the colt of an ass, a symbolic picture of a visitor arriving without pomp. John quotes a verse from the prophecy of Zechariah that further confirms that the promised King would appear in humility. How precious to grasp the truth of the scene in Jerusalem, as the Lord Jesus entered into the holy city in the last week of His life here on earth. The truth is there for all to appreciate that He was meek and lowly of heart, yet the One of whom John wrote earlier in his Gospel that: "...the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth." What amazing grace is this!

Verse 16 is an encouragement for those of us who are slow learners in divine things: "These things understood not his disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things unto him." If it was possible for the disciples to misunderstand, or to fail to grasp, the import of an event, then it is certainly possible for believers to lose their ability to see those things that are heavenly. The Apostle Peter confirms this in 2 Peter 1:9: "But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins." The cure for this is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We move now to an incident only recorded in this Gospel and which for us, as Gentiles, is of supreme importance. We can read the details of this in 12:20-22. "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." From this passage we learn that the Greeks were in Jerusalem as part of the vast crowd that came to celebrate the Passover, though they would not have been allowed to fully participate. The interesting element is that they sought out the disciples to request an interview with the Lord.

Before we look at the response to this request, I want us to notice that it was Andrew that took the message to Jesus. Philip told Andrew who must have suggested that they took the request to their Master. To us the fact that some Greeks wanted an audience with the Lord might not seem unusual. In that day and age it was very unusual. In John 4 we read that a Samaritan lady at the well, near to Sychar, said that the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. What was true of the Samaritans was also true of the Gentile Greeks. The religious Jew, so near to the great Feast of the Passover, would not defile himself by conversing with Gentile Greeks.

Perhaps then, Philip was not sure what to do when he received the Greeks' request and turned to Andrew for advice, for they were of the same town, in addition to being fellow disciples. Andrew, as was his wont, placed the matter before the Lord. It is this habit that I wish to emphasise by pointing out two other places where Andrew brought people, or events, into the presence of Jesus. In John 1 it was his own brother whom he brought to Jesus. In chapter 6 it was a lad with five barley loaves and two small fishes. I have spent this time on the example of Andrew bringing incidents, events and people to the Lord because I feel it is of immense importance to us today. These programmes are not broadcast only to increase our knowledge of the Bible, but rather to improve our relationship with the Lord. If our Bible study does not alter our attitudes, or affect our behaviour, then there is something lacking.

We must now return to the response of the Lord Jesus to the request of the Greeks, which we can read in verses 23 and 24: "And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. 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." These verses tell us that, as the Gentiles sought Him out, the momentous hour of His life had arrived. The discourse about death, that follows the enquiry from the Greeks, indicates that the time of His voluntary sacrifice for sin was drawing near. We can more readily appreciate this if we read His words in verses 27 and 28: "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name. Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again."

These verses are reminiscent of the Gethsemane experience, as recorded in the other three Gospels. Whilst Jesus shrank from a death inflicted cruelly and unjustly by the courts of men, He willingly embraced the sacrifice that was necessary to bring about the salvation and redemption of man.

We, as believers, must grasp the triumph that resonates in the phrase, "but for this cause came I unto this hour." The death and resurrection of the Lord brought glory unto the Father and the possibility of a rich forgiveness for repentant man. It is significant for us to notice also, that the response of the Father, in the verses just quoted, is that His Name had been glorified already. This can only mean that every detail of the life of the Lord Jesus glorified the Father.

This final crisis in the life of the Lord is re-emphasised in verses 31 to 33: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die." One might well ask who was judged at the trial and condemnation of Jesus. Such passages, as the one just read, bring before us the important truth that the cross was the judgment of the world that is under the control of the prince of darkness. The prince of this world is not the Lord Jesus, as might appear by a careless interpretation of verse 31, but Satan. Calvary appeared to be a great victory for the powers of darkness under the control of the great usurper, the devil. In reality, it was an utter defeat as Hebrews 2:14-15 make clear: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." We, as believers in the Lord Jesus, should be shouting this message from the housetops!

While concentrating upon the death of the Lord, as recorded in the verses we have read together, we have missed the truth of verses 25 and 26. We have only the time this morning to note that they are recommending a lifestyle for Christians that has never been very popular. These verses tell us that we have to die to the blandishments of the world and the enticements of sin. Naturally, we are selfish, always desiring those things that appeal to our baser appetite. We must die to the world, and all its lusts, if we wish to enjoy the life that Christ would give to us. This is the basic meaning of verse 25: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." We must follow Him or, as He says in another Gospel, we must deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Him. Maybe this is easier said than done, yet it is the path the Master trod and it is the path, we as servants, should tread.

Verses 37 to 43 give us an overview of the effects of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. It seems remarkable to us that, despite His many wondrous miracles, so few people really believed in Him. Yet, why should we think like this? We, also, have to admit that we needed sovereign grace to open our eyes to behold the greatness of Jesus. In our age, all we can be are faithful servants for the Lord and herald His message to the world in which we live. We can sow the seed, but it is the Lord who gives the increase.

Sadly, there is a comment, in 42 and 43 that points out a failing that can also too readily afflict us today. This is the possibility of refusing to acknowledge our faith in Christ, because we are frightened of the consequences. Verse forty-one has damning portents, with its judgment that we, as believers, can seek the praise of men rather than the praise of God. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy, urges Timothy not to shun unpopularity in the cause of Christ whatever the cost. 2 Timothy 1:8 tells us this: "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God." Note from this verse that God's power is available for those who remain loyal to Christ.

The closing verses of our chapter present us with the appeal with which the Lord Jesus closed His public ministry. It is, in effect, the essence of the whole of His ministry. To indicate what I mean I will quote verses 44 and 45: "Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me." Jesus, in His Person, His message and mission, confronts us with God. His words leave us with no other choice. He is either God incarnate or He is misleading His followers into a myth of masquerade. The church has traditionally followed the former statement that He is who He claimed to be: the glorious, majestic Son of God, supreme in His excellence. I pray that each of us this day may be true believers in the Lord Jesus and that we may be walking in His light, as we seek to serve Him all the days of our life.

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