

Centering on Jesus in Worship

Series: Thoughts on Worship

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Call to Worship: John 12:1–19

When you think about worship, what comes to mind? What do you look for in a worship service? What do you enjoy most? What makes a service rich and meaningful? When you think about the gathered worship of the church—what do you find most delightful and memorable?

There are many wonderful things about our times of worship: the fellowship we share together, opportunities we have to encourage one another, the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, the times of corporate prayer and intercession, the biblical preaching and teaching of God's Word. But as needful and as meaningful as these elements can be, they are *not* the chief joy and end of our worship. We sing and preach and pray and engage in these elements as a means to another end.

So what is that end?

I want to propose to you this evening—

**The end that is our great delight in worship is Jesus Christ Himself!
*His Person, His Work, and His glory!***

We can have preaching and singing—even good preaching and good singing. We can have praying and fellowship—heart-felt prayers and sweet-caring fellowship, but **if we miss Christ, we miss worship**. If we lose sight of Christ and His glory, our attempts at worship may sound good and look good and feel good, but they will be empty and vain.

What we need most in worship is to center on Christ—to look for Him, to pursue Him, to see Him, to embrace Him and to commune with Him.

I want to call your attention tonight to an occasion of worship where we find men seeking Jesus. Open your Bibles again to John 12. We read a moment ago for our call to worship the first nineteen verses of this chapter. Now we will continue with verse 20 and read down to verse 26. Here we read of an incident that takes place just five days before Jesus was crucified.

Hear the Word of God:

John 12:20–26 Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. But Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

As we consider this passage briefly tonight, I want to call your attention to three points:

- 1) The Occasion for worship
- 2) The Inquiry
- 3) The Answer

I. The Occasion for Worship

Verse 20 begins with certain Greeks who came to worship at the feast in Jerusalem. The feast mentioned here is the **Passover**. During the time of the New Testament, the Passover was the principle feast of the year. It was the one time of the year when everyone wanted to be in Jerusalem. God established this festival in the Old Testament and gave instruction to Moses in Exodus 12 and Leviticus 23. The first Passover was observed as God prepared to deliver His people from Egyptian bondage.

On the night of the first Passover God passed through the land and brought judgment on Egypt and its gods by killing all the firstborn of Egypt. Israel was commanded to place the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and lintel as an act of faith, marking out those who belonged to God. Where the angel of death saw the blood, he passed over and the firstborn did not die.

Exodus 12 provides instructions for the yearly observance of Passover: On the 10th day of the first month, they were to take a lamb— one “without blemish, a male of the first year”—and keep it until the 14th day of the month. Then, in the company of all who were gathered together for worship—they were to kill the lamb at sunset. They then took some of the lamb’s blood and put it on the doorposts and lintel of their houses. That evening they shared a meal together of the lamb roasted in fire, eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Scripture says, they were to eat the meal in haste, with a belt on their waist and sandals on their feet and a staff in their hand.

The Passover served to remind Israel of God’s provision and deliverance in the Exodus. It was God who brought them out of Egypt and established them as a nation. But the Passover also pointed to Christ and redemption. It was a foreshadow of what He would accomplish on the cross. And it was during Passover that Jesus was “delivered up to be crucified.”

Matthew 26:1–5

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, “You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.” Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. But they said, “Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”

Jesus is the spotless Lamb of God who was slain. He died that we might have life. He is the One who rescues us and delivers us from the bondage and darkness of sin.

The Jews had celebrated the Passover for hundreds of years. And now on this occasion, the very act of redemption, which the Passover anticipated as a type and shadow, was about to be fulfilled before their eyes.

II. The Inquiry

Verse 21 continues with the inquiry. Certain Greeks came to Phillip and asked him: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

These Greeks were likely Gentiles who had heard of the one true God and believed in Him. Though they were not physically born as part of the nation of Israel, they came to Jerusalem to worship at the festival as God-fearers.

They may have heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in the nearby town of Bethany (recorded in John 11). They may have seen or been a part of the great multitude described earlier in John 12 (that we read for our call to worship) when Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey as the people welcomed Him with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna!” They were no doubt curious about who Jesus was and why He was in Jerusalem during the Passover.

In John 12:19 we hear the Pharisees exclaim: “Look, the world has gone after Him.” The next verse (12:20) records the first mention of the world—Gentiles—coming and seeking Jesus.

In verse 32 of John 12, Jesus confirms the worldwide scope of His mission.

John 12:32

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”

This passage in John 12 marks the beginning of the gospel going out to the nations. Jesus is the Savior of the world—not just for the Jews—but for rescued sinners from every tribe and nation and tongue. Not just for those redeemed out of the physical nation of Israel— (Paul says in Romans that not all Israel is Israel. He describes Israel in Romans 11:17 as an olive tree. Much of physical Israel has been cut off as branches pruned from a tree.)— but Jesus is the Savior for all the redeemed. He has come to rescue Gentiles as well as Jews— who are now grafted in and made part of the true Israel of God, the church.

John says that certain Greeks came seeking Jesus. Regardless of the motives of these Greek worshippers, they had the right question: “We wish to see Jesus.”

There were multitudes at the feast. Many who came to celebrate had the advantage of a Jewish upbringing—a familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures. Many were there, doing and saying good things—faithfully observing all the details and required acts of worship prescribed by God in His Word. They were participating in the feast even as the very One to whom the feast was pointing was there in their midst, fulfilling the very purpose for which the feast was ordained. They were content to observe the festivities and enjoy the excitement of being in Jerusalem, **yet they missed Christ**. And that is tragic. They didn't expect Him. They weren't looking for Him.

But we read in our text that "certain Greeks" *were* seeking Jesus. It is worth noting that when the Greeks desired to see Jesus, they sought out a disciple—one who was known to walk with Jesus. They came to Philip.

Philip walked with Christ, and he attracted those who were seeking Christ.

And Philip, we are told in verse 22, went and told Andrew. Philip enlisted help and counsel as he pointed others to Jesus. Both Philip and Andrew went and told Jesus of the request to see Him.

In verses 23 to 26, Jesus gives His answer.

III. The Answer

In His answer Jesus directs their attention to His purpose of redemption. There are five elements of His answer that I want to bring to your attention.

1) Jesus points them to Himself and His glory: His hour has come.

Jesus knows that the time is near when He will be arrested and tried and will go to the cross to complete the redemptive work He was sent by His Father to accomplish. He says in verse 23 "the hour has come." Earlier in John we read in chapter 8:

John 8:20 These words Jesus spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one laid hands on Him, for His hour had not yet come.

But now in John 12 the time *has* come. All of history—past, present and future—points to the cross. Jesus is God's one plan of redemption. He is the one and only hope of salvation for all sinners in every age and generation. If we are to be saved, it must be by Christ Jesus. He is the only Mediator between God and men. Here in John 12 Jesus announces that the time of God's salvation, prophesied and anticipated for ages, has now come.

John 12:23 But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.

We hear this theme again in —

John 13:1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

John 17:1 Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You.

2) Jesus points them to His impending death on the cross.

Specifically, Jesus draws their attention to the fact that He must die if they are to have life. He gives the analogy of a grain of wheat.

John 12:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.

He must go to the cross shortly and die alone to atone for the sins of His people; but His death brings the promise of the resurrection and a coming harvest of souls that will encompass the nations. He will raise up a world of worshippers and His glory and praise will fill all heaven and earth.

The writer of Hebrews says in—

Hebrews 2:9–10 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Christ must die that many souls may be given life and brought to glory.

3) Jesus points them away from the world.

John 12:25 He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

We are to love Christ more than life itself—or anything this world can offer.

Later John would write:

1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

John is not speaking here of our enjoyment of the good gifts that God has given to us in this life. We are to enjoy and employ creation for His glory and our good. Nor is He speaking of our compassion for the lost. He is not saying that we should not love people. Jesus came to rescue the lost. His life and death and resurrection are a display of God’s love to the world. Christ did not die in a corner. God lifted Him up for all to see—that we might look to Him and live.

John is speaking here of forsaking sin and worldliness that is against God and would hinder us in our pursuit of God and obedience to His Word. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to look to Christ and forsake all that would keep us from Him:

Hebrews 12:1–3 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

4) Jesus points them to discipleship.

We read in verse 26—

John 12:26 If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

Looking to Christ by faith is costly. It means forsaking our attachment to the world and counting all as loss to gain Christ. It means forsaking our own plans and pursuits and reorienting our lives under God's revealed will in His Word, obeying and serving Him.

Jesus said in—

Matthew 10:38–39 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

Like Paul we must "count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:8). Knowing and serving Christ is more valuable than anything this world can offer.

5) Jesus points them to eternal reward.

You notice in verse 26 that our reward is being with Jesus. Heaven is essentially "being with Jesus" in all His glory and splendor and joy. It is a place where we will see Christ face to face and be made like Him in our glorification.

When Jesus told His disciples that He was going away in John 14, referring to His coming death on the cross, He comforted His disciples.

John 14:1–3 "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

The joy at the end was being with Christ. Jesus prayed for this in—

John 17:24 "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

There is great cost in looking for Jesus and following Him in obedience and faith. But there is also great reward. Our reward is seeing Jesus. One day we will see Him face to face. But even now we see Him by faith. We rest on His promises and rejoice in His gospel.

He is the One we seek and delight in when we come to worship with His people.

In **conclusion**, I want to give you three exhortations:

- 1) **Pray that God will give to the lost around you a holy curiosity of Christ and the gospel.** Pray that He will be at work in the lives of those you see throughout the week, stirring up interest and conviction and longing in their hearts. Only God can do this—so pray!
- 2) **Be known as a follower of Christ**, as one who walks with Him, so you are ready to point others to Him.

The Greeks sought out Philip because he was known to walk with Jesus. Ask yourself: If someone that you know were curious about Christ, would they know to come to you to ask about Him?

Other people are watching us. They are taking cues from us. If someone followed you, where would they end up? We must be careful of the pathways we take and the choices we make. Don't be so ensnared and entangled with the world that you lose the fragrance of the gospel. If we demonstrate by our lives that we love the world more than Christ, we will lead others who look to us down that road as well.

- 3) In all your efforts to walk in God's ways—worshiping and serving—**do not forget Christ.**

Without Christ, there is no worship. Without Christ, we would still be in our sins. Heaven would be unreachable to us. Without Christ there could be no obedience and walking in God's ways. Without Christ we would still be in bondage to our sin and in darkness. We would still be under condemnation and wrath.

BUT in Christ we can come and worship God as our Father with no fear of condemnation, with full assurance that He will embrace us and receive us as we are in Christ—clothed in His perfect righteousness.

It is because of Christ that we are here. When we come to worship—when we sing our songs, when we listen to God's Word read and preached, when we voice our prayers—do we content ourselves with religious activity or are we looking for Jesus? Does it matter if He is with us or not? If we didn't see Him here, would it concern us? Would we notice?

I pray that we would notice. And that we would cry out for Him.

We must look for Christ in every element of our worship. He must be at the center of our singing, our praying, our praising and rejoicing. And He must be at the center of our preaching as we declare and teach God's Word.

This past week I read a very encouraging and helpful article by Tom Nettles. Dr. Nettles serves on the board of Founders Ministries and has preached here at Grace many times. His article that will be in the upcoming issue of the *Founders Journal* addresses pastors on how to prepare their hearts and minds for the preaching of God's Word. He encourages those who proclaim the Scriptures to stay focused on Christ. Listen to an excerpt of his exhortation:

A sermon is not a Christian sermon unless it leads us to Christ; a text is not a biblical text unless it is seen in its connection to Christ. None of the promises are ours apart from Christ but "as many as may be the promises of God, in Him [Christ] they are yes" and only in Him do we find the assured and final affirmation that we may indeed live to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 1:20). Every law was given by Him to drive us to Him, every deliverer of Israel pictures what only Christ does. Every Psalm gives praise to the King of kings, every proverb shows us that wisdom is bound up in the cross of Christ, every prophet lets us know that in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son. Christ himself taught us this when he called two disciples "foolish men and slow of heart" because they failed to "believe in all that the prophets have spoken." Had they perceived correctly the prophetic message, they would have known that it was "necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory" (Luke 24:25, 26). He instructed them, therefore, "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets" and "explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (27) Without Christ in His suffering and glory all sermon content is trivial humanism.

—from "The Posture of Preaching" by Tom Nettles in the *Founders Journal* 74 (Fall 2008), 22–23.

Dr. Nettles has it right. We desperately need to see Christ exalted and clearly proclaimed in preaching in our churches today. When we sit under the preaching of the Word, we need to listen for it, long for it, and rejoice when we hear and embrace it.

When you come to worship, come looking for Christ!

Pray that God will reveal Christ to you in worship—that you would understand His Word, that you would lay hold of His promises, that you would seek first His Kingdom.

Look for Him in our praying—as we pray in His name

Look for Him in our singing. What are we saying *about* Jesus as we sing? What are we saying *to* Jesus as we sing?

Look for Him in our preaching. Are our sermons focused on Him? All of Scripture points us to Christ (Luke 24:27). Does the message help you to see how the passage relates to Christ?

Look for Him in our fellowship. When you greet one another here in the body of Christ, remember, this is my brother, this is my sister in Christ—this is one for whom Christ shed His blood—this is my fellow-laborer for the sake of the gospel. God has us here together to make Christ known and display His love and glory to all around us. Look for Jesus when you look for one another!

Our greatest need in worship is to see Jesus—to look again at who is He and what He accomplished for us by His life and death and resurrection and ascension and intercession—to remember again why it matters. We need reminded of our utter dependence upon Him and need to know Him more fully.

If we come and do not see Jesus, we have missed worship and missed the very purpose of our gathering.

My prayer for you tonight is that God will make Christ known in your hearts—that you will see Him in His beauty and flee to Him for life and joy and salvation.

Let us pray.

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