

JESUS THE 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 passage is the conclusion of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus had proclaimed in many ways that he is the Messiah. Finally he entered Jerusalem as a humble Savior King, riding on a donkey’s colt, in fulfillment of Scripture. People expected him to go to the palace, proclaim revolution, and bring about immediate political, social and economic reform. Instead, Jesus predicted his suffering and death and explained its meaning by an analogy of a kernel of wheat. Most people did not understand what Jesus was talking about. Though Jesus had performed many signs, people would not believe, because they felt Jesus did not conform to their idea of the Messiah. In the same way, many today have their own concept of the Messiah. There is a psychological Messiah, “Right On” Jesus, who makes us feel good about ourselves. There is a Hollywood Messiah, who rescues us like a superhero. There is a political Messiah, “Right wing Jesus.” There is an economic Messiah, a healing Messiah, a social justice Messiah, and so on. While there is an element of truth in each of these concepts, they miss the main point about who the Messiah is. We need to examine our concept of the Messiah. Is it what the Bible teaches? Or do we have our own idea? We need to listen to what the Bible tells us about the Messiah. Let’s learn what the Bible teaches about the true Messiah and accept him in our hearts, giving up our own ideas. He will give us eternal life and enable us to bear much fruit.

First, unless a kernel of wheat dies... (20-33). The Jewish Passover festival was approaching. It was a great national holiday like Independence Day. All Jewish men, who were scattered all over the world, were required to come to Jerusalem. Among them were some Greeks who had come to worship. They must have been Gentile converts to Judaism. Perhaps they were tired of Greek myths and philosophies, and moral corruption. They perceived that the God of truth was in Israel. Somehow they had heard about Jesus. They must have been shocked when they heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. They wanted to know who Jesus was. It was more than mere curiosity; they wanted to solve the problem of death and find the way of eternal life. They were truth seekers. So they came to Philip, who had a Greek sounding name, and requested, **“Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”** Philip hesitated to bring them to Jesus, perhaps because Jews did not

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associate with Gentiles. So he asked Andrew's opinion. Andrew did not hesitate; he, together with Philip, brought them to Jesus right away. When Jesus heard this, he replied, "**The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified**" (23). Until now Jesus had repeatedly said, "**My hour has not yet come**" (2:4; 7:6; 8:20). But here he said, "**The hour has come.**" It meant God's set time for his death on the cross. To die on the cross was very shameful and painful. It seemed to be failure and defeat. But Jesus saw this as glory and victory. The way of the cross is the way of glory and victory. Jesus explained this in three ways.

In the first place, Jesus explained his death through the analogy of the kernel of wheat (24). 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.**" Jesus foresaw abundant fruit coming forth through his death and resurrection, like a kernel of wheat that produces many seeds. The fruits would include Greeks, like those who came to him, who were representative of the Gentiles. Why did Jesus use the analogy of a kernel of wheat? It was to communicate the meaning of his death in a way that everyone could understand. Jesus' death was not an ordinary death. Everyone else dies because of their sins. People's death is just a terrible punishment for sin. But Jesus' death is different. He was sinless. He did not have to die for his own sins. He died as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world (1:29). His death has substitutionary atoning power to pay the debt that our sins deserve so that we can be forgiven and accepted by God as his children. Just as a kernel of wheat dies and produces many seeds, so through the death of one man Jesus Christ, innumerable souls have received salvation. However, if Jesus had not died for us, innumerable people would not have life, just as a kernel of wheat that remains only a single seed does not produce any fruit. So Jesus' death is very important. Jesus' death is related to the salvation of all people. Jesus used the analogy of the kernel of wheat to explain the meaning of his death in a way that all kinds of people can understand.

Let's think for a minute about how a kernel of wheat can produce many seeds. A kernel of wheat has the potential to bear much fruit because there is life in it. Life is mysterious. It can be understood as the potential to reproduce. By its very nature, life should grow and reproduce the same kind of life as itself. In order to grow and reproduce, a seed must fall to the ground and die. This is self-evident truth which everyone knows. Many universities have published studies that describe how a kernel of wheat grows into a full head of grain. The seed first falls to the ground. Composed of three parts—endosperm, bran and germ—it begins to germinate in the soil, producing both a stalk that pushes through the soil to the

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surface to take in energy from the sun, and roots that push downward to draw in water and nutrients from the soil. As the stalk grows, it divides into several parts. The plant goes through as many as eleven stages before it becomes ripened. This process takes about four months. A ripened head has 100-125 new kernels in it. If the harvested kernels are replanted over five growing cycles, more than 20 billion kernels will be produced. This is enough to feed 400 people for 34 years. This all comes from one kernel of wheat which fell to the ground and died. Actually, the death of the seed is transformation into an abundant new life.

Jesus' life is exactly like this. Jesus not only taught the principle of the kernel of wheat, he practiced it. Jesus gave up all his glory as God, who is infinite, eternal and almighty to come into this world in human flesh. He was like a seed falling to the ground. He was born in a manger and became poor in order to make us rich. He served all kinds of sinners, pouring out his life, love and energy for their sake. He set an example of life-giving service for people of all generations to follow. More than that, he died on the cross, shedding his blood to save us from sin and eternal condemnation. This is how Jesus became a kernel of wheat.

In the second place, Jesus applied the principle of the kernel of wheat to everyone (25-26). We cannot apply this analogy to our lives exactly as Jesus did. Yet there is a principle at work here that Jesus applies to all people. Let's read verse 25. **"Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."** Here to love one's life means to love it more than God. Hating one's life in this world does not mean torturing oneself day and night. Rather it means to deny oneself and to love God wholeheartedly. This involves commitment to Christ and sacrifice to do his work. It is a personal matter for each one which we refer to as "God's calling." God's calling is crucial to do God's work. Without God's calling no one can commit to God and bear fruit. Everyone wants to bear much fruit, but many people don't like commitment. These people misunderstand commitment as a kind of bondage. Yet the main reason they don't commit is that they love their lives in this world and want to enjoy them without hindrance. But Jesus said that anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. This is paradoxical, but it is the truth that Jesus taught. Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it"** (Mk 8:34-35, NIV 1984).

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Most people think, “If I deny myself in this selfish world, who will take care of me?” They also think that if they love their lives in this world, preserve them, and take good care of themselves, they will be happy. But this is not true. Instead they suffer from guilt, anxiety and fear, and in the end they lose everything when they die. One man was an excellent administrator for a manufacturing company. He worked very hard and accumulated a large sum of money which he planned to enjoy after retirement. But in the course of pursuing this, he had a heart attack induced by stress and anxiety, and died at the age of 64. What happened to his money? The worst part is, what happened to him after death? So we can say that to live for one’s self is a foolish investment. On the other hand, to lose oneself for Jesus and the gospel may seem to be foolish, but it is the wisest way of life. It leads one to eternal life and to be a blessing to others, producing much fruit. Innumerable people have lived out this truth, including many single women missionaries. For example, when Mother Sarah Barry went to Korea in 1955, at the age of 25, it was like falling to the ground and dying. It was her life commitment to Christ and his kingdom. She suffered in many ways, but God blessed her and enabled her to produce abundant spiritual fruit. Gladys Aylward was a single woman missionary from England to China in the early 20th century. She said, “Life is pitiful, death so familiar, suffering and pain so common, yet I would not be anywhere else. Do not wish me out of this or in any way seek to get me out, for I will not be got out while this trial is on. These are my people. God has given them to me, and I will live or die with them for Him and His glory.” So let’s not invest our lives only for ourselves, but for Christ and his kingdom. Amen.

In verse 26 Jesus said, **“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”** This is a great promise to his servants. As we follow Jesus he is with us always. When we serve God he does not leave us alone. When we need comfort, he comforts us. When we need encouragement, he encourages us. When we need wisdom, he supplies it. When we need strength, he gives it. He always provides for our needs. He loves us with unfailing love. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres (1 Co 13:7). And that’s not all. Those who serve Jesus will receive honor from the Father. At the end of their lives on earth, they will be welcomed into his glorious kingdom and hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and be adorned with the crown of righteousness (Mt 25:21-23; 2 Ti 4:8).

In the third place, Jesus explained the impact of his death on the cross (27-33). Though Jesus decided to die like a kernel of wheat, it was not easy for him

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as a human being. He expressed his agony, saying, “**Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’**” (27a) This is John’s version of Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer. Jesus was troubled when he thought about being betrayed, tried, condemned, mocked, insulted and crucified. More than that, he was troubled by the thought of being cut off from God on the cross because of our sins. This would make him cry out, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**” (Mt 27:46) As a human being, Jesus wanted to pray to save himself. But in that moment Jesus decided to obey God’s will, saying, “**No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!**” (27b-28a). Jesus remembered the purpose of his coming into the world (Heb 10:7). By accomplishing this purpose, Jesus would glorify God. Jesus had glorified God through his life and now he would glorify God through his death. The Father was pleased with Jesus’ prayer and said, “**I have glorified it and will glorify it again**” (28b). The Father would not abandon the Son Jesus to the grave, but would raise him from the dead and exalt him as the Lord before whom every knee would bow. Through this he would proclaim his Name—the one who has almighty power and glory—to all creation. People misunderstood the Father’s voice as thunder or an angel. But Jesus assured them that it was for their benefit. Then Jesus explained what would happen through his death on the cross. First of all, the prince of this world, the devil, would be driven out (31). The devil had a foothold in this world through the sin of mankind and the power of death. But Jesus, by his death and resurrection, took away this foothold and crushed the devil’s head. Now the devil is like a snake with a crushed head and a flailing tail. Secondly, by being lifted up, Jesus would draw all people to himself (32). Being “lifted up” refers to Jesus’ death, resurrection and exaltation. Through this, Jesus would save people of every tribe and language and nation. They would come and worship him, the Lamb of God, seated on the throne (Rev 5:12-13). Jesus’ death would indeed be a great work that solves the fundamental problem of all mankind (33).

Second, Jesus invited people to believe in the light (34-50). The crowd did not like hearing that the Son of Man would die. So they spoke up, “**We have never heard that the Messiah would die. Rather, he must remain forever. What are you talking about?**” (a paraphrase of verse 34). Their concept of the Messiah was tainted by their human desires. They listened selectively to the Messiah’s glory, but ignored his suffering and death. This wrong concept would lead them astray from the truth and into destruction, but they did not realize it. They were like squirrels crossing the street amidst zooming cars, not realizing they were in danger. Jesus had a great shepherd’s heart for them. So he urged them to walk in the light while they had it, before darkness overtook them (35). Jesus promised that when

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they believed in the light, they would become children of light (36). Then they would be able to discern the true Messiah from false concepts of the messiah and enjoy the privilege of being God's children.

In verses 37-43, the author John analyzed the unbelief of the Jewish nation as his conclusion about Jesus' public ministry. People like to say, "If God shows me a sign, I will believe in him." But even after Jesus had shown many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him (37). To believe in Jesus is not a matter of evidence, but of heart. John was not surprised at their unbelief because it was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (38a). John quoted Isaiah 53:1, which introduced the chapter on the suffering Messiah. Because they did not like suffering, they rejected this Biblical Messiah. It seems that their rejection would hinder God's plan. But it did not. John quoted Isaiah 6:10, which reveals that God knew their hearts would be hardened by unbelief. Yet he continued to carry out his plan of salvation anyway. God never fails. People's unbelief does not hinder God; it only hurts them. God's salvation plan was very clear. Jesus the Messiah would first suffer, and die for our sins. Then glory would come through his resurrection and exaltation. The glory that comes through suffering is the true glory. Without suffering, there is no glory. This principle can be applied to every area. For example a beautiful, heart-moving ballet performance that is worthy of glory comes through much suffering. People don't like suffering because it is painful and seems futile. But suffering in Christ has great meaning and leads us to true glory. So let's suffer for the glory of God!

In verse 42, John gives another reason for their unbelief: fear of rejection. Many even among the leaders believed in Jesus silently. But they would not confess their faith because they were afraid of being put out of the synagogue. To be rejected by people is painful. But to be rejected by Jesus eternally is much more serious. Verse 43 tells of another reason for their unbelief: loving human praise more than praise from God. We human beings need respect, honor and praise. So we are vulnerable to the praise of people. When we love human praise more than praise from God, we lose God's praise and fall into unbelief. Jesus saw people caught by this power of unbelief, and he wanted to save them. So he cried out, **"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). Jesus and the Father are one. Jesus wanted people to trust in the power and love of the Father and break out of their unbelief by faith. Jesus had come into the world to shed the light of God's presence among mankind (46).

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In verses 47-50 Jesus talks mainly about his words. His words enable us to overcome the power of darkness and enter into his wonderful light. However, anyone who hears his words but does not keep them will be judged by his words (47-48). Jesus' words are God's words (49-50). Those who receive his words will be led to eternal life, while those who reject his words will be led to judgment and condemnation. To accept Jesus' words is not a small matter; it is a matter of eternal life and death. Jesus' words are like a kernel of wheat which has life in it. Let's accept Jesus' words about a kernel of wheat and practice this truth in our lives. Then God can make us more fruitful than we can even imagine.