

### “A Grain of Wheat Must Die”

What does it mean for a grain of wheat to die? Jesus says that a grain of wheat must die for it to bear fruit. In our passage Jesus is responding to a request from “some Greeks” to meet with him. It is not clear that Jesus ever met directly with these Greeks, but what is clear is that Jesus is talking about his own impending death. The death that Jesus is describing to Philip and Andrew is a death that will benefit both Jews and Gentiles. In other words, Jesus’ death has meaning to all people everywhere throughout all time. It has global impact. The Triune God created the world and now the Triune God is redeeming the world. **Colossians 1** taught us that through the Eternal Son, the world was created. In **John 12**, Jesus is saying that through the Eternal Son, the world will be saved.

Even though Jesus will save the world by his death, the people who receive him are the only people that will be given eternal life. In John’s gospel, there is ample evidence that the only people that will benefit from the gracious gift of redemption are those that receive Jesus by faith. **John 1:12** says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

The message that Jesus died for sinners is not just a story. It carries with it a call to repentance and faith in Jesus. But what is repentance and what is faith? Firstly, repentance is the act of turning from one thing to another. We usually repent of decisions that we make. To be precise, repentance is about turning from something that we see as bad to something that we understand to be good. So, when we say that we repent (turn) and have faith in Jesus, what do we mean?

Basically, what we are trying to say is that we turn from self-love and sin to trust in who Jesus is and what he accomplished. Trust is a very useful word because it clears up what we mean by faith. We must hold on to, lean against, build our lives upon Jesus and what he did for sinners. To rely on him in this way means that we turn our backs on all other methods for seeking peace with God and meaning in life. To have faith in Jesus means that we cling to him like a drowning man clings to a life-preserver. We build our lives on his promises, like wise builders who only choose to build on good foundations. We rely on him the way we rely on food to nourish our bodies. Jesus is our only hope in life and death. Therefore, when Jesus says that “the hour has come,” it brings us so much hope and joy. But we have kind of gotten ahead of ourselves in the text.

The verses that we read a few moments ago told us about an exchange between some Greeks, Philip, Andrew, and Jesus, but what comes before this conversation is important for understanding what happens. At this point in Jesus’ life and ministry, he has already been traveling extensively around Judea and Galilee. He has healed countless people, taught with authority, and demonstrated wisdom beyond that of the leading figures of Jewish society. In **John 10-11**, Jesus and the disciples are in an area where

John the Baptist had been baptizing people when news reached them that their friend Lazarus was sick and going to die.

Jesus loved Lazarus but did not immediately go to heal him. He waited a couple of days before going to the place where Lazarus lived. By the time that Jesus arrived in the town of Bethany, Lazarus had died. It was at that time that Jesus declared himself to be the Resurrection and the Life—meaning that anyone who trusts in him is no longer under the cruel dominion of death. To demonstrate this truth, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. After Lazarus from raised from the dead, the religious leaders sought for ways to arrest and kill Jesus. However, much to their disappointment, many more people, upon seeing Lazarus alive again, believed in Jesus. All this excitement around Jesus culminated in what is called the triumphal entry. On the first day of the week after Lazarus had been raised from the dead, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey to the shouts of praise of the people. They declared him King of Israel.

After Jesus entered Jerusalem, **John 12:20-21** says some Greeks who were there to worship approached Jesus' disciples to seek an audience with Jesus. Most Bible commentators say that the arrival of these Greeks to meet with Jesus and his response to them marks the inclusion of the Gentiles into the redeeming work of Jesus. Jesus has already encountered several Gentiles through the course of his ministry, but when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the coming Kingdom of God, he told them not to enter Gentile or Samaritan lands. Now, however, things appear to have changed. Their approach seems to indicate that the situation has changed.

The Greeks approach Jesus through his disciples—namely through Philip. I am not sure why they approached Philip or how they would have known that Philip was from Bethsaida. Perhaps they already knew him, or he was speaking in an accent that told them that he was the right person to speak to. What seems more likely to me is the details of Philip are incidental to the story. In other words, John included these details because the detail adds more credible information to the account. The Greeks spoke to Philip, and John records that fact. I think that all the other Apostles were from Galilee so they would likely have had the same kinds of accents, etc. What seems plausible to me then is that Philip was approached, and the details about him were given to accurately retell the story.

At any rate, the Greeks ask to see Jesus, and Philip asks Andrew what he thinks. Andrew and Philip then go together to tell Jesus that some Greeks want to meet him. Jesus' response is quite surprising in my opinion. He responds by declaring that his time to be glorified has come. It is somewhat difficult to see the connection between the Greeks wanting to meet him and Jesus' declaration that his hour had come. When Jesus says that the "hour" has come, we get to see the payoff of a major theme in John's gospel. Repeatedly throughout the gospel, Jesus says that his hour had not yet come. You can go back and read **John 2**, **John 4**, **John 5**, and **John 7**. In these chapters Jesus says that an hour is coming, or his hour has not yet come. But something has changed. His hour had come.

I think we can infer from Jesus' response how much the cross was looming before him. In **verse 27** Jesus says, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this purpose I have come to this hour." What is important to Jesus is that the time had arrived for which he had come to earth. Remember that the Eternal Son humbled himself to be born as a human. He had grown up like all of us. He experienced the same temptations and trials that we all face, but never succumbed to sin. Our Lord Jesus did not come to the earth just for some trials and temptations, however. Jesus came to the world to redeem the world. It was now his hour to fulfill his purpose.

Jesus tells the disciples a parable to illustrate what had to happen. He said, “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.” The earthly image is easy to understand. For there to be any meaning to wheat (or any other plant) it must be harvested or replanted. I think we can say that a field full of mature rice is a pleasant sight, but the real pleasure comes with the knowledge that when it is harvested it will satisfy our hunger. Likewise, the wheat that stands on its own does not serve any purpose. If wheat were somehow to try to preserve its own life, then all it would accomplish is a slightly longer yet still fleeting existence. On the other hand, if the wheat falls to the ground, it will die right away. BUT by dying in that particular way the wheat will bring forth much more fruit.

Jesus’ point is clear. By laying down his own life, he will accomplish the goal for which he came to earth in the first place. He would be the redemption that sinners need. He would take away the penalty of our shameful, law-breaking sin. The Lord Jesus’ death does not benefit a small group of followers, nor does it only work for a certain group of people. The presence of “some Greeks” and the crowds in Jerusalem praising him as King points to the greater reality. Jesus is laying down his life for the world. **John 3:16** says it this way, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” **Revelation 5:9-10** put it this way, “... Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

The grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die for this to take place. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to take a few moments and reflect on the cost of sin and rebellion against God. We have all sinned and no one is righteous. Irrespective of culture, we all acknowledge that we have all failed to live up to what we know to be right, but the Bible’s definition of sin runs deeper than that. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command and sinned. They knew that they had sinned because of the intense shame that came on them. We understand that shame. We have all felt guilt wash over us because we have failed to do what we ought to do. But there are many other things that we should do, but through neglect and weakness of character, we fail to do. When we realize our faults, it increases our sense of shame. Shame then is an important part in recognizing sin, but another side of sin is that it is law breaking. Most people can dismiss the idea that they are sinners because they will say that they don’t break the law. But whose law are they judging themselves by? If they are judging themselves against their country’s laws that is no comfort because laws change all the time. We are all most likely breaking some laws. On the other hand, when the Bible speaks about sin it is talking about God’s law. We can call this the Law. The Law comes from God, it reveals his character, and shows us what is right and what is wrong. We have all failed to live up to the Law. We have broken God’s commandments and sinned just like Adam and Eve did. The Law is universal, and it is written on the heart of mankind. That is why people all over the world know that lying, murder, stealing, and adultery are wrong. Even when people make allowances for sin, they still know that it is wrong.

Sin is everywhere, and it brings shame and judgment on us all. What would you say is the just penalty for murder? For theft? Different countries have different penalties, but the more severe the crime, the more severe the punishment. In our case, we have broken all of God’s Law. Because his Law represents his character, we are not simply breaking a law. We are rejecting God. We are denying his Lordship. We are telling God that we do not need him or want anything to do with him. Even the most merciful king in

the world would have to punish that kind of rebellion. The one, True God is just in bringing judgment to sinful humanity. And that judgment is death. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” **Rom. 6:23**

So back to Jesus...he says that the grain of wheat must fall into the earth and die to bring forth fruit. Do you see it? Jesus is laying down his life for sinful humanity. We all had the death penalty justly laid on us, but Jesus lays down his life in our place to fulfill the judgment appointed by God. The power of sin and the devil is strong. The judgment of God is definite. But the grace of God is deeper. Jesus lays down his life for his people. He suffered, bled, and died. He was buried and descended to the dead. He did these things for us. And because he was without sin, God accepted his sacrifice. In the wisdom of the Triune God, this is how judgment is averted, and how we get to dwell with God as his people. The cost of sin is so high. We cannot pay it. But God did what was necessary for us.

Jesus is talking about himself in **John 12:24**, but he quickly transitions to talking about our relationship with him. In **verse 25**, Jesus says, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in the world will keep it for eternal life.” This is one of the statements of Jesus that can be considered a “hard saying.” Is Jesus really saying that we can only have eternal life if we hate our lives? That sounds truly miserable. On the other hand, Jesus could be talking about himself. To lay down one’s life intentionally could be said to hate (or despise) their life. It is also true that by willingly laying down his sinless life, his sacrifice was accepted, and he was resurrected.

The best way to think about **John 12:25** though is to consider Jesus’ example. Jesus laid down his life so that we could be saved. In other words, he sets for us the example of what truly trusting God is. As humans, death is a scary thing. It appears to be the end of our existence. To believe in God’s plan and will and lay down our life requires incredible trust. Jesus did lay down his life. He put more importance on eternal life. Compared to the people around us who are striving to get all they can from life and to hold on to this life with all their strength, the Lord is calling us to put all our trust, hope, and devotion in him. Therefore, Jesus says, “<sup>26</sup>If anyone serves me, he must follow me.” Where did Jesus go? He went to the cross and died. But he did not stay on the cross nor did he stay in the grave.

“And where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” This is a tremendous promise. The idea of laying down our lives or sacrificing everything for God is a high cost. But I urge you to remember that it cost our Lord his life, and surely, we cannot expect to be treated better than our Lord Jesus was treated. However, when we compare this life and what Jesus is promising, we see how empty it is to hold on to this life. Jesus says, “Whoever loves (tries to hold onto) his life loses it.” If you try to keep it, you lose it. If you lay your life down, then you keep your life for eternity. If you put your complete trust in the Lord Jesus, then he will bring you to where he is, and moreover Jesus says, “the Father will honor him.” Jesus actually says that God the Father will honor us. The book of Revelation mentions crowns. Paul talks about rewards in heaven, but I think the better and deeper thing is that we get to dwell with God forever. I cannot think of a better gift than being able to dwell with God and be part of his people.

We have been called to discipleship by the same person who, looking forward to his own death, says to his disciples, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.” The Eternal Son, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, deserved worship. He could have ordered multitudes of

angelic hosts to take care of his every need. Instead, Jesus, knowing that the cross lay before him, thought about us. He knew that his death would bear fruit, and he knew that his death would glorify the Father. Therefore, he went to the cross. I urge you all to trust in Jesus. Do not prioritize this life. All human life is precious, but it is also fragile. We do not know how many days we have on earth. No matter how strong a hold you have on your life; no matter how careful you are with your health; no matter how diligent you are to cultivate useful relationships, your life will end the same as everyone else's. The call to follow Jesus is not a call to die for other people on a cross. Jesus has already died for us. We are called to follow Jesus.

Following Jesus may mean facing persecution. It may mean being rejected by other people, but when you really consider what our lives are for (praising God), and what we receive for following/trusting Jesus (eternal life), we cannot say that we are losing out on anything.

The call for Christians and non-Christians is the same: trust in Jesus; follow Jesus. He died for sinners. He died so we can be adopted into God's family. Repent and trust in Jesus. Follow him. That is the simple response to the Lord Jesus-follow him.