WE WISH TO SEE JESUS

John 12:20-24

By

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When the historic Church of the Open Door was in downtown Los Angeles, I heard that if you stood behind the pulpit you looked out into a massive auditorium consisting of a large first floor, a large balcony, and even a second balcony. Although I never stood there, I was told that it gave you a feeling of importance just to stand there and look out at the large crowd that had gathered to hear you speak. But just as your ego might begin to inflate, you quickly came down to earth when you looked down at a little plaque fixed to the pulpit with the words of John 12:21, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

“We didn’t come here to see you! We don’t want to be impressed with your brilliance or eloquence! We want to see Jesus!” Those are appropriate words for every preacher to remember and, for that matter, for every Christian to keep in mind. In 1 John 3:2, the apostle tells us, “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” Seeing Jesus will transform us. And so, even though now we “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12), our aim should be to see more and more of Jesus. As we grow to see more of His glory now, it progressively changes us into His image. As Paul says (2 Cor. 3:18): “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

So the question is, how do we see Jesus and His glory now? Then, what difference will seeing Jesus and His glory make in our lives? That question is answered in John 12:25-26, which we will look at next week. But this week we want to focus on how do we see Jesus and His glory now? John 12:20-24 tells us:

To see Jesus and His glory, look to the cross.

In response to the Greeks’ request to see Jesus, He announces that the hour has now come. This is the hour of the cross. Jesus is the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies so that it
bears much fruit (v. 24). Then Jesus applies this to us (vv. 25-26): His followers must also lose their lives even as Jesus would lose His. But, there are great rewards for those who do.

This is an interesting text for several reasons. First, it seems a bit unexpected to find Greeks in Jerusalem at this Jewish feast. These were probably Gentiles who were proselytes to Judaism. It’s also rather odd that John tells us about their request to see Jesus, but then they pass off the scene and we never learn whether their request was granted or what came of it. My guess is that Jesus granted their request, but we aren’t told. John just uses their request to turn the corner towards the cross. Philip seems rather confused by their request and talks to Andrew. Then the two of them come to Jesus with the Greeks’ request. But it’s not obvious on the surface how Jesus’ reply relates to the Greeks’ desire to see Him.

It is clear, however, that Jesus sees this request as a pivotal point in His ministry. Up till now, there has been a repeated theme in John’s Gospel that Jesus’ hour or time has not yet come. When His mother came to Jesus at the wedding in Cana and informed Him that they had run out of wine, He replied that His hour had not yet come (John 2:4). When His brothers, who were not yet believing in Him, advised Him to go to the Feast of Tabernacles and make Himself known, Jesus replied that His time was not yet here (John 7:4). Later, at that feast, when the hostile Jews tried to seize Him, they were unable to lay a hand on Him, because His hour had not come (John 7:30). When Jesus taught openly in the temple, again His enemies could not seize Him, because His hour had not yet come (John 8:20).

But now, in response to the request of these Greeks to see Him, Jesus announces (John 12:23), “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Why? What was the significance of these Greeks and their desire to see Jesus? The answer is that these Greeks signaled a turning point in which the Jewish people have rejected Jesus as their Savior and so now the gospel would go out to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Salvation would now be proclaimed to the whole world.

This worldwide scope of the gospel was telegraphed in John 3:16-17, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have
eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” We also saw it in John 4:42, when the Samaritan people told the woman who had met Jesus by the well, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.” The gospel came to the Jews first, but now that they have largely rejected it, the message goes out to the whole world. (Paul develops that theme in Romans 9-11. He practiced it in Acts 13:45-46.)

John makes this point in a subtle and skillful manner. First, he contrasts the Pharisees with the Greeks (John 12:19-20). The Pharisees were the religious leaders in Israel. They should have accepted Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. But instead, they rejected Him and were seeking to kill Him. In contrast, the Greeks were seeking Him. John wants us to see that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus did not thwart God’s plan of salvation; rather, it means good news for the world (Rom. 11:15).

Also, John uses irony to report the frustrated words of the Pharisees as they saw the crowds shouting “Hosanna” as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey’s colt (John 12:19): “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him.” John’s irony is, “Yes, in fact the world is going after Jesus.” He is the Savior not only of the Jews, but of all people who seek Him.

I want to draw two important truths from these verses:

1. **God’s ultimate aim in history is to glorify His Son.**

   Jesus says (John 12:23), “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite way to refer to Himself. It had overtones of His deity, but undertones of His humanity (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* [Eerdmans], p. 172). Morris says (pp. 172-173), “It was a way of alluding to and yet veiling His messiahship, for His concept of the Messiah differed markedly from that commonly held.” He adds that in John’s Gospel, “the term is always associated either with Christ’s heavenly glory or with the salvation He came to bring.”

   In the last chapter, when Jesus looked ahead to raising Lazarus from the dead, He said (John 11:4), “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be
glorified by it.” This means that to glorify the Son is tantamount to glorifying God, which was Jesus’ aim in all that He did. As we have seen (in my message on John 11:38-57, p. 2), God’s glory is His essential and intrinsic splendor. His glory is displayed in all of His attributes and works. Since God’s ultimate aim is to glorify Himself through His Son, our chief aim is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

Back in John 5:22-23, Jesus made a statement that would be blasphemous on the lips of anyone who is not equal to God: “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” In His prayer just before going out to Gethsemane, Jesus prayed (John 17:1), “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You...” He added (John 17:5), “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

The apostle Paul repeatedly made the same point. After mentioning how Jesus humbled Himself by being obedient to death on the cross, Paul added (Phil. 2:9-11):

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Ephesians 1:10, Paul said that God’s purpose is “the summing up of all things in Christ.” In Colossians 1:18, Paul said that Christ “will come to have first place in everything.” In Revelation (21:22-23), John describes the New Jerusalem:

I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.

So throughout eternity we will live in the light of the glory of God and His Son, the Lamb who was slain for us! Paul sums up the application for us (1 Cor. 10:31): “Whether, then, you eat or
drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” To state it negatively: If something doesn’t glorify God (make Him look good, as He truly is), then don’t do it. The battle begins on the thought level: Do your thoughts glorify God? Do your attitudes glorify the Savior? (Hint: Grumbling does not glorify God! Thankfulness does!) It extends to your words: Does what you say to your mate or your children glorify God? Does what you say about another person behind her back glorify God? Paul says that we shouldn’t use rotten speech that tears someone down, but only words that edify and give grace to others (Eph. 4:29). Then it flows out to our behavior: Did your actions this week glorify God? Did your actions make God look good so that others will be drawn to your Savior? Since God’s aim in history is to glorify His Son, our aim every day should be to glorify our Lord and Savior.

2. The cross reveals God’s glory in Christ.

When Jesus said (John 12:23), “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” He was referring to the cross. The same is true when He prayed (John 17:1), “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You .....” Jesus glorified the Father and the Father glorified Jesus through the cross. How? Here are three ways (there are many more):

A. The cross reveals Jesus’ glory by having all people come to Him alone for salvation.

G. Campbell Morgan explained (The Gospel According to John [Revell], p. 215), “Jesus said in effect, ‘These Greeks cannot see Me. There is only one way by which they may see Me, know Me, apprehend Me; and that is through the “hour” that has now come, and that is through the way of the Cross.’”

So, Jesus is the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies, thus producing much fruit (John 12:24). Augustine explained (cited by Morris, p. 593, note 69), “He spoke of Himself. He Himself was the grain that had to die, and be multiplied; to suffer death through the unbelief of the Jews, and to be multiplied in the faith of many nations.” A grain of wheat by itself, sitting on the shelf, remains alone. But if it falls into the ground and that outer shell “dies,” the life inside is released and produces a plant containing
many grains of wheat. Through the cross, the gospel was opened to all peoples.

Jesus is the Savior for the Jews first, but also for the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16). But whether Jew or Gentile, all must come through Jesus and His substitutionary death alone. There are not many ways to God. Jesus is the only way. He said (John 14:6), “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” Peter echoed this when he proclaimed to the Jewish leaders (Acts 4:12), “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

But when these Greeks approached Philip at the feast, he seemed a bit hesitant to bring them to Jesus. We don’t know, by the way, why they went to Philip. Perhaps it was his Greek name or maybe, as John here reminds us (12:21), he was from Bethsaida of Galilee, which was near Gentile provinces. But before Philip went to Jesus with the Greeks’ request, he conferred with Andrew and then together they went to Jesus.

Probably Philip’s hesitation stemmed from Jesus’ earlier instructions to the twelve before He sent them out on a preaching tour (Matt. 10:5-6), “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus’ mission, in line with the Abrahamic Covenant to bless all nations through his descendants, was first to offer Himself to the Jews as their Messiah. He opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles only after Israel rejected Him. Now the gospel goes out to the nations through those who through faith are Abraham’s true spiritual children (Gal. 3:7).

In the Great Commission, just before He ascended, Jesus plainly commanded (Matt. 28:19), “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ....” Luke (24:47) reports Jesus as telling His disciples “that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations ....” In Revelation (5:9; 7:9), John sees a great multitude in heaven from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, whom Jesus purchased with His blood. So the cross reveals Jesus’ glory by having all people come to Him alone for salvation. There is no salvation outside of faith in Jesus’ death for our sins.
B. The cross reveals Jesus’ glory by nullifying the boastful works of sinners.

This is Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. He shows how God sets aside the so-called “wisdom” of this world and replaces it with Christ crucified. He states (1 Cor. 1:22-24), “For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." He goes on to show that God did not choose the Corinthians for salvation because of their wisdom or earthly status, so that no one may boast before the Lord. He sums up (1 Cor. 1:30-31): “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.'”

Paul has a similar argument in Galatians, where he refutes the proud claims of the Judaizers, who said that in addition to faith in Christ, people had to keep the Jewish law, especially the rite of circumcision. But if sinners can commend themselves to God on the basis of anything that they can do, then they have grounds for boasting in their good works (Gal. 6:13). But Paul concludes (Gal. 6:14), “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

The cross means that Jesus did everything necessary for our salvation. He paid in full the debt that we owe. He satisfied God’s righteous judgment against our sins. There is nothing that we can do to qualify for heaven. All we can do is to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; but repentance and faith are His gifts, so that none can boast (Acts 11:18; Eph. 2:8-9). Thus He gets all the glory for our salvation and we get none. That’s the practical point of the doctrine of election: God gets all the glory for our salvation. If He had not chosen us, we never would have chosen Him.

C. The cross reveals Jesus’ glory by being the supreme revelation of God’s perfect love and justice.

The cross showed God’s love, not just for the Jews, but for the world (John 3:16). It reveals God’s great love for us, “in that
while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). John de-
clares (1 John 4:10), “In this is love, not that we loved God, but
that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our
sins.” Jesus didn’t love us because we were worthy. He loved us in
spite of our rebellion against Him. As Charles Wesley wrote,
“Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for
me!”

But that word “propitiation” points to another aspect of
God’s glory as seen in the cross: His perfect justice. God didn’t
love us so much that He just said, “I’ll overlook your sins.” If He
had done that, He wouldn’t be just and righteous. A judge who
dismissed murderers and rapists with no penalty would not be just.
The requirement of the law must be upheld. So God’s gracious
solution was to send His Son as the propitiation (a sacrifice that
satisfies God’s wrath) for our sins. Hebrews 2:17 says that Jesus
had to share our human nature “so that He might become a merci-
ful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make
propitiation for the sins of the people.” So at the cross Jesus bore
the wrath of God on behalf of all whom the Father gave to Him.

Leon Morris (The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross [Eerdmans], p.
211) sums up an exhaustive study of the Greek words for “propiti-
ation:” “Thus the use of the concept of propitiation witnesses to
two great realities, the one, the reality and the seriousness of the
divine reaction against sin, and the other, the reality and the great-
ness of the divine love which provided the gift which should avert
the wrath from men.” The cross shows Jesus’ glory by being the
supreme revelation of God’s perfect love and justice. If you have
not fled to the cross for mercy, you’re still under God’s terrible
wrath (John 3:36). But God invites all sinners to come to Jesus and
be saved (Rom. 10:12-13).

Thus, God’s ultimate aim in history is to glorify His Son. The
cross reveals God’s glory in Christ by having all people come to
Him alone for salvation; by nullifying the boastful works of sinners;
and by displaying God’s perfect love and justice. If I had time, I
could develop the point that the cross reveals Jesus’ glory by bear-
ing much fruit through His death, as John 12:24 shows. As Jesus
said (John 6:39), “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all
that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last
day.” He did not shed His blood in vain, hoping that some might be saved. He shed His blood effectually to save all whom the Fa-
ther had given Him.

Conclusion

So to see Jesus and His glory, you don’t need to have a mysti-
cal vision. Rather, look to the cross. The cross reveals Jesus’ glory. Ask God to open your eyes to the glory of Christ and Him cruci-
fied! Meditate often on the cross. It will humble your pride, which is your biggest impediment to loving God and loving others. It will stir your heart with love and worship for the Savior, who gave Himself for you when you were a sinful rebel. It will give you com-
passion and hope for the lost, who can be saved by looking in faith to Jesus as the substitute for their sins. And, as we’ll see in our next study (of John 12:25-26), seeing Jesus’ glory in the cross will trans-
form you so that others will see Him through you.

Application Questions

1. What practical applications stem from understanding that the gospel is primarily about God’s glory in Christ, not about us? (See God’s Passion for His Glory, by John Piper.)

2. Many would argue that to say that Jesus is the only way to God is intolerant and arrogant. How would you answer them?

3. Why is it important to understand that repentance and saving faith are God’s gifts? What Scriptures support this? What er-
rors result if this is denied?

4. An unbeliever tells you, “When someone wrongs me, I just forgive him. Why can’t God just forgive us without killing His Son?” How would you reply?

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