

Sunday February 24, 2024
Lesson 13: Prayer in Troubling Times
Scripture: John 12: 20-36

Context:

Today we conclude our winter curriculum, “God Abides,” as we have focused on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. We end our final unit titled “Faithful Prayer,” by looking at the prayer life of Jesus. Today’s lesson will be to focus on Jesus’ glorification in his time of trouble.

The gospel of John presents Jesus as very assured of his identity and mission. From his “I Am” statements to his final words on the cross, Jesus is aware of what he was sent to do and how he fits into the salvation story. As such, both those who follow him in the text and readers see Jesus as transparent and knowledgeable about his identity. While the original audience may not understand everything Jesus says, he makes it clear everything will connect at the right time.

In today’s text, Jesus has come into Jerusalem for the final time to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. Some of the trouble begins when Greeks curious to the religious traditions of the land want to see Jesus. Some scholars assert these are Jewish Greeks who have returned home to observe the Passover, while other scholars believe John is speaking to non-Jews in the early church who are looking to be known by Jesus.¹ Whatever the case, the moment opens an opportunity for Jesus to talk about his death and glorification.

As Jesus responds to the invitation to talk of his death and glorification, other things begin to take place. He makes the allusion to a seed falling from the wheat to die and bear fruit. While the seed loses its life, it yields a harvest of many. Jesus ties this to his own ministry and about those who follow him. He claims how those who follow him will also be honored by the Father.

Then Jesus takes a strange twist as this honor does not lead him to talk about its wonders or even his eager anticipation of what is to take place. Jesus names what he is about to do troubles him and names the tension of asking the Father to deliver him. Yet Jesus names obedience before God as important and with the obedience a price will be paid.² So instead, Jesus asks he be glorified in what he is about to do.

An interruption comes though as a voice from heaven says this will be glorified. The crowd cannot hear it completely and begin to question whether it is thunder or an angel. Jesus explains how this is for him and not for them. They ask a fair question: if the Christ has been foretold to be with them forever, why must he be lifted up and who is the Human One. The response Jesus gives to them is about light and walking in the light. As they walk in the light, they will begin to believe in the light and their lives will be changed. Jesus concludes by going away and hiding from them.

This interesting closing presents a common theme of John’s Jesus leaving his audience to reflect on his teachings. Jesus presents himself in John as the condition of all human sight, all

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 155.

² *Ibid.*, 158.

knowledge, and all progress in learning.³ And thus the rest of the narrative begins to shape into Jesus' impending last supper with his disciples and ultimately his arrest and trial. This is the beginning of the end for Jesus' "glorification."

Application

At first glance, we might wonder why this section is included as the focus is on prayer. Throughout the series, we have looked at very specific examples of prayer. When we arrive to the section for today, the prayer is not fully named and yet it is present if we peer close enough. Jesus shows us how to pray during trouble; and in this case shows his own glorification. We are shown how prayer is multidimensional and also something about the identity of Jesus.

Jesus names his soul is troubled, a startling revelation particularly in the gospel of John where Jesus often knows his identity and is boldly aware of what he is to do. Yet in this tender moment, Jesus reveals he knows what is coming and there is a naming of how he could pray for the Father to deliver him. He does not do so as he proceeds to name this as part of the mission for God to glorify it. God proceeds to do so and the prayer is answered right then, right there. God will glorify him in what is about to happen and will do so repeatedly.

We can nod our heads and go along because we know what this means. Jesus' death will be the saving act for the world, inviting sinners to know we have a chance and to rejoice in how God has tasted death and given life because the Lord loves us. Jesus' death and resurrection do indeed bring glory to the world and to God.

However, the prayer Jesus models also invites us to think about how we pray and how do we see prayer as a channel of communication with the Lord. In the church, we often spend a great deal of time praying in various ways with two which stand out to me. One way we pray is for those around us. For example, we know of a friend receiving treatments for cancer and we join in both individual and corporate prayer for the friend. It is beautiful as we lift their name alongside others and pray in different ways of healing or peace for the friend, their family, and their medical team.

The other most common prayers we pray are for ourselves. We might pray for us to do something well in school or work. We pray for wisdom or understanding to do the right thing. We say "Lord help us" when we have someone who makes us question our sanity and we truly need the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts and mouths to a better place. All of these prayers are equally valid and important. The book of Psalms contains such prayers as these with the psalmists pouring out to God everything in their hearts and minds.

Yet one prayer we might have trouble praying is for God to be with us in our troubles and then also to glorify the Lord in them. Most of us, and for good reason, do not like the idea of troubles coming our way. The old saying "Don't go looking for trouble," often rings in my ear when I hear of things and might be enticed to chase a rabbit or stir something up. Trouble is not something to be pursued or sought out based on the experiences I have had in life.

Even still, this is what Jesus does as part of his ministry and his last time in Jerusalem. He calls out to God the Father to glorify what is to happen and there is a response just for him. Even as Jesus goes to look for trouble, God will be at work in what is to happen.

We are not Jesus even as we might strive to be like him. Yet what strikes me in reading this passage is thinking about how we surrender to God, specifically in the act of prayer. We do so every Sunday or every time we say "thy will be done," when we pray the Lord's Prayer.

³ Ibid. 161.

Every day is an opportunity for us to ask God to be with us in our struggles and then to also be glorified in whatever we face or endure. Our prayers of “help” or “deliver me” can sometimes lead us to places we never expected, and we find the Lord God there with us all along.

Experience has come to teach me even when we do not look for trouble, trouble will ultimately find us in some way or form. As Christians, the best prayer we can lift is God to be with us in those seasons of trouble and to also surrender to the idea of how God might even be glorified in some struggle we go through. I have often found how my own troubles will eventually lead me to be more compassionate, empathetic, wise, and loving. God works through those times and seasons to help me be a better disciple and ultimately, I can see how God is at work in my story, even in sections I could not understand. It is a reminder the story of life is ultimately tied to God’s story, and we are all given an opportunity to be a part of God’s narrative.

How have you seen prayer at work during someone’s troubles? Was there a time your prayer life led you to see your struggles or troubles in a different way? How do you pray when you are troubled? When was a time you felt God comforting you in a troubling time? How can prayer empower us in the midst of our troubles?