

He Who Loves His Life Will Lose It **(John 12:17-41)**

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background

- a. Jesus has becoming popular with the people, through the miraculous signs he is performing. He recently raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead.
- b. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, including the high priest, want to kill Jesus.
- c. In the week before His final Passover, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on donkeys. The crowds shout, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; the King of Israel!" and lay palm branches down on the road.

II. Jesus Speaks of His Impending Death (Read John 12:17-34)

- a. Outline of the action of this story
 - i. Some Greeks (Gentiles) who have heard about Jesus ask Philip if they can see Jesus.
 - ii. Philip and Andrew tell Jesus about this.
 - iii. Jesus answers strangely, speaking of His own death, which is soon to take place.
 1. Like a grain of wheat, he must die in order to produce much grain. Speaking with riddles, He explains both why and how He must die.
 2. Jesus is troubled about what is about to take place (his crucifixion). However, rather than asking that His Father save him from that hour, He asks that God glorify His name through it.
 - a. The voice of God answers, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again."
 - b. Those present hear something; some think it was thunder; others think perhaps an angel had spoken to Jesus.
 3. Jesus goes on to talk about how He will be "lifted up", which provokes a discussion from the people, who are confused as they believe that the Christ will remain forever.

- b. First teaching here: Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies...
 - i. “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.” (**John 12:24–25**, NKJV)
 - ii. This teaching pertains not only to Jesus Himself, but also to all who will follow Him.
 - iii. Explanation of this parable from agriculture and gardening.
 - 1. If 100 seed are in a packet of seeds, they remain 100 seeds.
 - 2. The only way for each seed to multiply is for it to “die”, and be buried in the soil, losing its singular existence.
 - 3. As a result, through its death each individual seed can produce hundreds of other seeds.
 - iv. Jesus explains *why He must die*: in order that many others can live. He is doing this voluntarily, willingly dying to produce a greater harvest in the future.
 - 1. This was proclaimed by John the Baptist at the beginning of this gospel, who proclaimed He was “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. (**John 1:29**, NKJV)
 - 2. “And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (**Matthew 20:27–28**, NKJV)
 - a. In answer to the question, “*Why did one person need to die for the people*”, there are two ways Christians generally answer this question.
 - i. Some say it was a sacrifice to satisfy the wrath of God. By this reasoning God was angry, justice had to be met, so Jesus took on the wrath and punishment from God that we deserved. (This is sometimes called the *Penal Substitution view of the Atonement*.)
 - ii. Others say that Satan had taken us captive due to our sin, and that Jesus paid the ransom to Satan to redeem us. (This is sometimes called the *Ransom or Classical view of the Atonement*. This model of the Atonement is portrayed beautifully

in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The lion in the story, who died to ransom others from sin, represents Christ.)

- b. I encourage you to consider both of these perspectives, in light of all the Scriptures. For more on this subject, I encourage you to listen to two audio lessons by David Bercot, available through Scroll Publishing: *What the Early Christians Believed About the Atonement* and *Questions About the Atonement*.
3. In **Isaiah 53** it talks about the Suffering Servant, who “bears our sins and suffers for us”, who was “led to death”. It speaks of “the Righteous One who serves many well, and He shall bear their sins. Therefore, he shall inherit many, and will divide the spoil with the strong.” (from **Isaiah 52:13-53:12**)
4. “And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation,” (**John 11:49–51**, NKJV)
5. Again, we see the sacrifice of one saves many others. The death of one seed produces a great harvest.
- v. Jesus uses this point to challenge His followers as well, with a general statement. He calls His followers to lose their lives for the benefit of others as well, just as He did.
 1. “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (**John 12:25**, NKJV)
 - a. Jesus had to die, as do those who will follow Him!
 2. Other places in the New Testament where Jesus or Paul call us to “hate our lives” or to “lose our lives”:
 - a. “Therefore, whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a

man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 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." (**Matthew 10:32–39**, NKJV)

- b. "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." (**Luke 14:26**, NKJV)
 - i. "Hating our lives" does not mean here that we don't like how our life is going. Instead, it is about giving up our life, sacrificing our life for others, like the seed that dies.
- c. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." (**Mark 8:35**, NKJV)
- d. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained. Therefore, I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself." (**2 Timothy 2:8–13**, NKJV)

3. Ways in which this teaching applies to Christians.

- a. In context, most of these teachings are given in the face of persecution and possible death. This includes persecution by our own family members. We are to hate our own lives, to be willing to follow the example of Jesus who gave up His own life: a seed willing to die to produce a great harvest.
- b. **Romans 6** teaches that we are to die with Christ in baptism. In addition, our lives as Christians will be characterized by dying with Christ and hating our own

lives. This popular idea promoted by many today that being a Christian will usher only blessings and make your life much easier and happier is not true! This Christian life must be marked with self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, and death.

- c. Approximately 2/3 of the population of the world lives in countries where Christians face significant persecution. While we do don't currently experience this type of persecution in the United States, we may see it here in the future. For some listening to this lesson in other parts of the world, these Scriptures may accurately describe what you are facing today!
- d. Tertullian, a church leader and writer from Carthage, North Africa (c. 160-220 AD) wrote, regarding persecution of Christians in his day:
 - i. The context of the quote below is that Tertullian is defending the Christians, who are getting blamed for all bad things by the Roman empire. If the rivers flood, it's the Christians' fault. If there is a drought, it's the Christians' fault. Tertullian complained that the answer to any disaster was typically: "Christians to the lions!" Tertullian argues that this is not the right response. In fact, he reminds them, there were terrible things that happened before Christians came on the scene (volcanic eruption, disastrous weather, invasions, etc.). Tertullian argues that the Christians have actually had a *calming influence* on the normal course of disastrous events, so they should stop blaming everything on the Christians! Tertullian continues and speaks of how the Christians view their lives of suffering:
 - ii. "Well, it is quite true that it is our desire to suffer, but it is in the way that the soldier longs for war. No one indeed suffers willingly, since suffering necessarily implies fear and danger. Yet the man who objected to the conflict, both fights with all his strength, and when victorious, he rejoices in the battle, because he reaps from it glory and spoil. It is our battle to be summoned to your tribunals that there, under fear of

execution, we may battle for the truth. But the day is won when the object of the struggle is gained. This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil [the reward] of life eternal. But we are overcome. Yes, when we have obtained our wishes. Therefore, we conquer in dying; we go forth victorious at the very time we are subdued.

- iii. “But go zealously on, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent.
- iv. “...Nor does your cruelty, however exquisite, avail you; it is rather a temptation to us. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.
- v. “...Many of your writers exhort to the courageous bearing of pain and death, as Cicero in the *Tusculans*, as Seneca in his *Chances*, as Diogenes, Pyrrhus, Callinicus; and yet their words do not find so many disciples as Christians do, teachers not by words, but by their deeds. That very obstinacy you rail against is the preceptress [=instructor]. For who that contemplates it, is not excited to inquire what is at the bottom of it? Who, after inquiry, does not embrace our doctrines? And when he has embraced them, desires not to suffer that he may become partaker of the fulness of God’s grace, that he may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood?
- vi. “For that secures the remission of all offences. On this account it is that we return thanks on the very spot for your sentences. As the divine and human are ever opposed to each other, when we are condemned by you, we are acquitted by the Highest.” (Source: Tertullian, *The Apology*, chapter 50; in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, pp. 54-55).
- e. Tertullian beautifully describes the attitude of the Christians: we are engaged in a great contest, to

overcome trials, suffering, even death, remaining faithful to the end, and thereby obtaining the spoils of eternal life!

- i. This is *the real battle* we are called to live day in and day out. Sadly, Satan has deceived so many believers with false, contrived battles that sap time, energy, money and passion away from the *true battle* that God wants us to engage in.
 - ii. We especially see this in the passionate involvement by so many into professional sports, politics, wars and video games. In each case there is a battle between two sides, “the good guys vs. the bad guys”, or “us vs. them”, that captures the emotions of viewers. We (men particularly) seem to be designed to want to engage in a noble battle, to wage our part in a great struggle. Yet so many are sitting on the sidelines spending hours and hours watching foolish, made-up battles between overpaid athletes and in computer-simulated video games.
 - iii. May we *wake up*, cast off the fake, contrived battles that ensnare us, and *engage in the real spiritual war* being waged all around us!
- f. **Question:** What does it mean to hate our lives in order to gain an eternal reward?
- i. **Answer:** This is the lesson of **Hebrews 10-12**; that we must be prepared to suffer and to follow the example of spiritual heroes of the past, who were faithful until the very end.
 - ii. Read **Hebrews 10:32-39**
 - iii. Read **Hebrews 11:35-38**
 - iv. Read **Hebrews 12:1-11**
 - v. Lesson for us from **Hebrews 10-12**:
 - 1. The righteous shall live by faith (**Habakkuk 2:3-4**). Saving faith is *a way of life* that includes persevering to the end. It is *not* simply the belief of one moment!

2. Heroes and heroines of faith had it rough: stoned, sawn in two, slain with the sword, destitute, afflicted, tormented.
 3. Jesus endured the cross “for the joy set before Him” (Jesus was the seed that died, even as He was looking forward to the great harvest of those who would be saved).
 4. We will be chastened and refined; *scourged* by God! This will be painful in the short term; but there will be a great harvest of righteousness if we allow ourselves to be trained by it.
- c. Second teaching here: The ruler of this world is cast out.
- i. “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out.” (**John 12:31**, NKJV)
 - ii. Satan is the ruler of this world, his own kingdom.
 1. “Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.’” (**Luke 4:5–7**, NKJV)
 2. “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?” (**Matthew 12:26**, NKJV)
 3. “I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” (**Acts 26:17–18**, NKJV)
- d. Third teaching here: Jesus will be killed by being “lifted up”
- i. “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.’ This He said, signifying by what death He would die.” (**John 12:32–33**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus told in advance, through this riddle, how he would be killed. He would be “lifted up” on the cross.

- iii. “And as Moses *lifted up* the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be *lifted up*, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” (**John 3:14–15**, NKJV)
 - 1. Moses was told to take a bronze snake and put it on a pole for all to see, to be healed from the poisonous bite of the serpent. (**Numbers 21:4-9**)
- iv. In the story of Jonah, when all the people on the ship were afraid of perishing, they asked Jonah where he came from and what they should do. He told them he was running away from the God that created the earth and the sea! Then he told them what they needed to do in order to save themselves from destruction:
 - 1. “And he said to them, ‘*Pick me up* and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.’” (**Jonah 1:12**, NKJV)
 - 2. “*Picking up*” the one Jewish prophet and handing him over to death would save everyone on board. Of course, Jesus later pointed to Jonah’s figurative death and resurrection after three days as foreshadowing his own.
 - a. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (**Matthew 12:40**, NKJV)
- v. While Christians take the crucifixion of Jesus as a matter of course, two groups struggle with it.
 - 1. That the Jews crucified their Messiah, the Christ was “a stumbling block to the Jews” (**1 Corinthians 1:23**)
 - a. “If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.” (**Deuteronomy 21:22–23**, NKJV)
 - b. Trypho, in his debate with Justin Martyr, struggles with this idea that the Christ could have died such a horrible, cursed death.
 - 2. Muslims, following the Koran, reject the idea that Jesus was crucified. They claim it only appeared that way, and that the

Christians later changed the story regarding both the crucifixion and resurrection.

- a. Of course, there are *many* prophecies, including: the Passover Lamb in, Abraham sacrificing Isaac in **Genesis 22**, prophecies of **Isaiah 52-53**, and **Psalms 22 & 69**, all of which foretell aspects of the crucifixion of Christ.
- vi. Notice that the Jews who heard Jesus speak about “being lifted up” were confused.
 1. They understood that the Christ would remain forever. Presumably they thought Jesus was saying He would be “lifted up” like Elijah or Enoch (taken to heaven).
 2. **Question:** Why did the Jews believe the Christ *would remain forever*?
 - a. Consider **2 Samuel 7** (designated **2 Kingdoms 7** in the LXX) and **1 Chronicles 17**, in the prophecy that Nathan gave to David. Nathan spoke of one of the descendants of David, that the Lord will “establish his throne forever...” The Lord said, “I will establish him in My house and in My kingdom forever; his throne shall be established forever.” (**1 Chronicles 17:11-14**)
 - b. Perhaps this belief that the Christ would remain forever also was based on **Psalms 110:1-4** (designated **Psalms 109** in the LXX). There it says of the Christ, the ruler sitting at the Lord’s right hand, “you are a priest forever”.
 3. The Jews interacting with Jesus clearly *did not understand* that there would be two comings of the Christ. Jesus would come to suffer, die and be lifted up during his first coming. However, He would be coming a second time to bring judgment and to reign forever.

III. Jesus Quotes from Isaiah (Read John 12:35-41)

- a. Next in our passage, Jesus quotes from the **Book of Isaiah**.
- b. Jesus calls us to be “sons of the light”.
 - i. See Him as the light who came into the dark world.
 - ii. Recall the prophecy of Isaiah regarding the light that was to come into the world: “The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them

a light has shined.” (**Isaiah 9:2**, NKJV; also quoted in **Matthew 4:15-16**)

- iii. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (**John 3:19–21**, NKJV)

c. He quotes two passages from Isaiah.

- i. He quotes **Isaiah 53:1**, to illustrate that practically no one would believe the Suffering Servant sent by God, when He came.
- ii. He quotes **Isaiah 6:10** to illustrate that the problem is in their hearts and minds (blind and hard-hearted).

d. Another look at **Isaiah 6**. Read **Isaiah 6:1-10**.

- i. **Question:** Whose fault is it (God’s or the people’s) that they don’t understand the message?
- ii. **Answer:** *They* have closed their eyes.
 - 1. In the passage in **Matthew 13** where this passage from **Isaiah 6:10** is quoted, it follows the LXX and says: “For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.” (**Matthew 13:15**, NKJV)
 - 2. This is similar to how early Christians explained Pharaoh’s heart being hardened by God: the same heat of the sun *softens wax*, while it *hardens clay*.
 - a. While the sun is doing the hardening (and softening), the difference in outcome depends on the *nature of the substance* being hardened or softened (clay versus wax). Similarly, each of us must decide which type of heart we are going to have (whether we choose to have a wax-like heart that will become *softened*, or a clay-like heart that will become *hardened* when exposed to the “heat” of truth from God).

iii. **Question:** *Who* was sitting on the throne, in **Isaiah 6**?

- 1. Recall that it is *impossible to see God* (the Father).

- a. It seems that Isaiah himself is aware of this problem, when he says, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.” (**Isaiah 6:5**, NKJV)
- b. Perhaps Isaiah was aware of this problem (impossible for a man to see God, the Father and survive) based on what was told to Moses in **Exodus 33:12-23**. There, the Lord had clearly stated that *no one can see His face and live!*
- c. There are similar statements in the New Testament that no one can see God (the Father).
 - i. “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (**John 1:18**, NKJV)
 - ii. “...He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.” (**1 Timothy 6:15-16**, NKJV)

2. **Question:** *Who did Isaiah see*, if he could not have seen God (the Father)?

- a. Regarding the scene in **Isaiah 6**, that Jesus discusses in **John 12**, the apostle John explains to us that Isaiah saw the Son of God (who later took on flesh and became Jesus).
 - i. “These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.” (**John 12:41**, NKJV)
 - ii. Understood in the context of **John 12:37-41**, “His” and “Him” in **John 12:41** clearly refer to Jesus, the Son of God.
 - iii. So, Isaiah saw *the Son of God* (who later would take on flesh and human nature in Jesus) in the throne room!
- b. Theophany = appearance of God in the OT; early Christians saw this as being the Son of God (the Word of

God). There are many examples, as we discussed in our recent **Genesis** series.

- i. An obvious one is where “the Lord” has lunch with Abraham in **Genesis 18**, before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
 - ii. For more on this, see the article on Theophany in *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. by David Bercot
 - c. Eusebius (bishop in Caesarea, early church apologist and historian, writing c. 320 AD) provided us with an extended discussion on Old Testament prophecies that prove the divinity of Christ. Within that discussion, he pointed to the account of Isaiah “seeing God” in **Isaiah 6** as one more example pointing to the divinity of Christ. (Source: Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, book 7, chapter 1)
3. Why this is important for Christians to understand (that Isaiah saw the Son of God in **Isaiah 6:1-10**):
- a. To show the divinity of the Son of God, from the Old Testament, to persuade those who claim that this foundational Christian teaching was not made up in the early Church; it is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament.
 - i. This is useful for explaining to Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Muslims or others who dispute the divinity of Christ.
 - b. Knowing where the Son of God came from, before He became man in Jesus, can help us appreciate the humility of Christ. As Paul points out in **Philippians 2:1-8**, this is an upward call for all Christians to be humble and to consider others before ourselves!