

“When I Am Lifted Up”

The Forty-First in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 12:27-36; Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Jesus has entered Jerusalem in apparent triumph. As he heads along the road from Bethany to Jerusalem a huge crowd spontaneously assembles and begins the messianic chant, “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The people expect Jesus to enter the city, to take his place on David’s royal throne, and then free the nation from their Roman oppressors. But Jesus is entering his city only to be rejected by Israel, to suffer and die for the sins of his people, to bear the wrath of his Father in his own flesh, and to rise again from the dead. When Jesus does take his rightful place on David’s throne, it will be a heavenly throne when Jesus ascends into heaven. In John’s Gospel, Jesus reveals what he is about to do to a group of Greeks (Gentile God-fearers), who have come to Jerusalem to witness Israel’s Passover celebration. In revealing what is about to transpire, Jesus tells these Gentiles that his hour is now at hand. Jesus speaks openly of his own great anguish, and his mission is audibly confirmed by his heavenly Father. Jesus tells the crowds which assembled as he began speaking, that he must be lifted up in order to draw all people unto himself. Jesus is, of course, speaking of his cross. And those listening to him are struggling to make sense of it all.

We continue to work our way through the Gospel of John. We have come to John chapter 12, and we are considering a remarkable teaching discourse which takes place soon after Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday. The remarkable thing about the content of John 12:20-36, is that Jesus begins to speak about his coming death and resurrection soon after he had entered Jerusalem to the messianic chants of the people. On the face of it, Palm Sunday looked as though this was the long-expected day when Jesus enters Jerusalem to the accolades of the people of Israel to claim David’s royal throne. While the people correctly sense the messianic implications of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, they cannot yet know that events are about to take a very dramatic and unexpected turn.

The sad reality is that Palm Sunday is every bit as much a tragedy as it is a triumph. Although the people of Israel cheer and shout messianic anthems, the reality is that Jesus is not the king they want or expect, and so the very moment when Jesus is arrested and stands helpless before Caiaphas (the Jewish high priest) and then Pilate (the Roman governor), the people turn on him and began calling for his death at the hands of a hated Roman bureaucrat—Pilate. On Palm Sunday, the people see Jesus as the successor to king David and they are thrilled. By Friday (the Passover), they see Jesus as a mere messianic pretender who should be put to death for causing so much trouble.

The events recorded at the end of John 12 serve to set the stage for the lengthy teaching discourse (the so-called Upper Room Discourse) of John 13-17, when Jesus prepares his disciples for his unexpected departure from them. In light of Jesus’ dramatic entrance into Jerusalem, the disciples cannot understand how the whole course of Jesus’ messianic ministry will change so drastically in the next few days. Jesus had raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, just the week before. This was his seventh and most dramatic sign yet, confirming that he is both the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. On Sunday he entered Jerusalem in triumph, but as we read in the synoptic gospels, immediately after entering the city, Jesus went to the temple to pray and saw that the outer court (the so-called court of the Gentiles), was filled with merchants and money-changers selling their wares. According to Jesus, these men had turned the temple from a place of prayer into a den of thieves and robbers. Acting in righteous anger, Jesus drove them out. The conflict between Jesus and the Sanhedrin will rapidly escalate in the days ahead.

In John 12:20 ff, John recounts how it was that after Jesus entered Jerusalem (and likely after Jesus had driven the merchants and money-changers from the temple as recounted in Matthew and Mark), a group of Greeks approached one of Jesus' disciples, Philip, asking to speak with Jesus. Philip told Andrew, and the two of them, in turn, went to Jesus. John gives us few details, but he does say that Jesus chose this time to reveal to these Gentile God-fearers (men who believed that YHWH was the true and living God) that his hour has *now* come. Throughout John's Gospel so far, Jesus has always spoken of his hour as yet future. Yet, Jesus tells this group of Greek God-fearers, that his messianic mission has indeed come to its end, and that he will be glorified by his Father. The great irony in all of this is that even though it looks like Israel has embraced Jesus—his people are actually in the process of rejecting him.

Those present and listening to Jesus, no doubt, assumed that when Jesus said his hour had come, and that he was about to be glorified, he was speaking of his entrance into Jerusalem—that he was about to claim David's throne. It is, therefore, very important to consider the fact that Jesus reveals this information not to the people of Israel, but instead, to a group of Greeks. Jesus tells these Gentiles that his hour has come, and he ties this directly to his coming death and resurrection. Jesus tells them so in the form of an analogy. In verses 24-26, Jesus says, *“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. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.”*

Jesus' glorification—despite appearances to the contrary—has nothing to do with his recent entrance into Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus had hinted at what lay ahead while in the home of Simon the Leper, when our Lord announced that Mary would anoint him yet again for his death and burial. Furthermore, no one seemed to catch the fact that Jesus did not enter Jerusalem merely to celebrate the Passover. Rather, Jesus came to fulfil it. As John first told us back in the opening chapter of this gospel, Jesus is *“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* Jesus is also the perfect high priest who offers the perfect sacrifice—himself. But on Palm Sunday, no one present in the crowds cheering, and expecting Jesus to rule over Israel during a time of national revival, could have ever predicted this course of events.

Jesus tells the Greeks, presumably in the presence of his disciples and in the hearing of the crowd which has gathered around them, that those who follow Jesus (his true disciples) must be willing to give up their own lives in exchange for the life Jesus gives—eternal life. Jesus is not speaking of martyrdom, although there are times when that will be the case. From this vantage point in redemptive history (before his death and resurrection), Jesus is asking his disciples to do something which seems completely impossible. Once Jesus dies and then is raised from the dead, it becomes clear that Jesus is speaking of the necessity of giving up (in an absolute sense) reliance upon one's own good works, merit, ethnicity, social standing (or whatever else it might be) to gain eternal life. The blessings of eternal life come only to those who willing to lose their lives through renouncing their own righteousness, and then trusting in Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection to save them from their sins.

And so having announced that his hour has come, and that he will be glorified, in verse 27, Jesus continues to elaborate his point. But he reveals how difficult this will be. *“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.”* Hardly a cold-hearted stoic, Jesus reveals his own personal anguish despite the inevitability of what must transpire. Jesus knows that because his hour has come, he must suffer and die upon the cross. Far worse than enduring the physical pain (as awful as it will be), Jesus must also experience that terrible and mysterious moment when he becomes accursed, rejected, and the object of his Father's wrath. This side

of eternity, we cannot begin to understand that awful moment when the Father pours out his wrath upon his sinless yet cursed son (cursed only because the guilt of our sins has been imputed to him).

Although Jesus knows the coming week will end in his glorification, nevertheless Jesus is deeply troubled. Even though there is no hint whatsoever of any possibility that Jesus might turn back and not complete his mission, clearly, Jesus dreads what is to come. He dreads the suffering and physical anguish he must endure. He is in anguish over the rejection *by* his people (Israel), because this ultimately leads to the coming rejection *of* his people—as in Matthew 23:37-39 ff when Jesus prays for Jerusalem. Jesus is God in human flesh and he will accomplish his Father’s will. Yet in no way is he a dispassioned observer of these events. His soul is deeply troubled. He will endure this terrible suffering for us, and for our sake’s to save us from our sins. But he dreads what is coming.

Although commentators disagree over whether Jesus is truly asking to be delivered from what is to come (as does in Gethsemane—“Father, take this cup from me”) or whether the question “*what shall I say,*” is merely hypothetical, and answered in the next clause, “*Father save me from this hour.*”¹ The ESV gets this right. This is a sincere question. When Jesus announces that his hour has come—he describes his soul as deeply troubled. This, I think, indicates that he is truly asking that he be delivered from the horrible agony he knows it yet to come, *because* his hour has arrived. No doubt, Jesus knows what lay ahead—a Roman cross. Yet, Jesus will obey his Father’s will and drink the cup of God’s wrath down to the last drop. As he says, “*for this purpose, I have come to this hour.*” What Jesus says in John 12 then, is very similar to what he will say several days later in the Garden of Gethsemane, shortly before his arrest, as recounted in Matthew 26:36 ff., when Jesus he prays, “if it be your will, let this cup pass.”

Jesus’ question is actually asked in the form of a prayer, and he is immediately given an answer. Jesus pleads, “*Father, glorify your name.*” There is no doubt Jesus will accomplish his work of redemption, for he seeks nothing else other than to bring glory to his heavenly Father. In fact, our Lord’s words echo the declaration found in Ezekiel 36:22. “*Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.*” YHWH had promised that his name would be glorified when his spirit brings life to the dead as foretold by Ezekiel. Upon Jesus speaking these words which echo YHWH’s declaration about his purposes to Israel, there comes “*a voice [which] came from heaven: I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*” This is the Father’s voice, and Jesus alone recognizes it as such.

There are three recorded instances during our Lord’s ministry in which an audible voice from heaven confirms that Jesus is indeed doing the will of God. One is at the time of Jesus’ baptism. As we read in Matthew 3:16-17, “*and when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’*” The other instance is at the time of our Lord’s transfiguration as recounted in Matthew 17:5-8. [Jesus] “*was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.’ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise, and have no fear.’ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.*”

This is event is similar to the earlier instances of YHWH audibly confirming Jesus’ mission, as is clear

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 439-440.

from verses 29-30. *“The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not mine.’”* Jesus hears the voice and identifies YHWH as speaker, but the crowds do not understand the words, nor recognize the speaker—they only hear a sound which they think may be thunder, or even the voice of an angel. But the bystanders do hear something which they know to be far out of the ordinary.

At this point a huge question arises. If the voice has spoken for the people’s sake, why is it that they cannot understand it? There are a number of reasons why this could be the case. For one thing, throughout Israel’s history, YHWH confirmed his chosen servants (i.e., the prophets and others) through supernatural manifestations. The words did not need to be intelligible to the crowds, because Jesus understood them and they were spoken to him, although the crowds did hear the noise. Perhaps the words (had they understood) them been too much for the disciples to bear. They were having a very difficult time shifting from triumph mode (Palm Sunday) to the fact that Jesus was going to do more than celebrate the Passover—he was going to fulfill it by suffering and dying. But the voice from heaven (even if unintelligible) made it clear that Jesus’ ministry had come to a great turning point.²

With the audible confirmation of Jesus’ words coming from heaven, in verse 31, Jesus announces that because his hour has come, so too *“now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”* Previously, Jesus declared that his hour results in his glorification, and a new way of following him (through giving up one’s life by receiving his—eternal life), so too the time has now come for the world to be judged and for Satan to be cast out. This is a loaded sentence and we need to carefully unpack it.

We know from many biblical texts that the final judgment occurs when Jesus returns a second time at the end of the age. Yet, Jesus is telling his audience that with his messianic mission coming to its conclusion (his impending death and resurrection), when he dies upon the cross, God will deal with human sin once and for all—thereby saving his people (his elect). But the death of Jesus is also a sign of judgment upon the unbelieving world, because all human sin must be punished by a holy God. The cross announces to the watching world that either the Savior dies for you and in your place, or else you will be punished by God for your own sins. In the cross, we see God’s judgment upon sin, pointing us ahead to the day when all sin is punished and when there will be no excuse for those who reject the cross of Jesus Christ. When Jesus dies on the cross, the power of sin is broken, but a final judgment is also guaranteed.

The impending death and resurrection of Christ will also bring about God’s judgment upon the serpent (the Devil). When Jesus dies upon the cross, not only is the first promise of the Gospel fulfilled (Genesis 3:15—*“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”*) but the words of Revelation 12:11 ff., describe the future consequences of Jesus’ death for his people as they struggle with Satan and his minions before our Lord returns. *“And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!’”* The cross and the empty tomb mark the total defeat of Satan, who is now enraged because his fate is sealed and because on the

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 441-442.

last day, the devil and all his host, will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

Yet another indication of the judgment of the world coming to fruition in the death and resurrection of Jesus is found in the next two verses (32-33). “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.*” This is a reference to what Reformed theologians call the “passive obedience” of Christ. Our Lord’s life is not taken from him against his will by powers greater than himself. Rather, Jesus willingly lays down his life for his sheep. The language of being “lifted up” comes directly from Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12—our Old Testament lesson). In verse 13, of Isaiah 52, YHWH says, “*behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.*” Through suffering and dying on behalf of his people (for their sins), God’s humble servant will be exalted. This indicates the kind of death that Jesus will die—for his people, in their place, bearing in his own flesh God’s righteous anger which we deserve. But then this is the very thing the people of Israel did not understand on Palm Sunday. How can the conquering Messiah and heir to David’s throne also be Isaiah’s suffering servant?

And so when Jesus dies as the suffering servant—whose death displays both the love and justice of God, who defeats Satan and casts him from heaven, who dies on behalf of his people—he will indeed draw all people to himself. Here, we see an echo of John 6:44, when Jesus said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*” People who are dead in sin, love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. They do not come to Christ, because they do not want to come to Christ. But, Jesus says, God’s appointed means of drawing such people unto himself will be the preaching of Christ, and him crucified. As we will see in the Upper Room Discourse, the Holy Spirit works through particular means to save God’s people—the preached word and the sacraments. Because Jesus’ hour has come, and he will be lifted up (on the cross), he will draw all people to himself and the gospel will go out to the very ends of the earth—starting with those Greeks who sought Jesus out and who, presumably are listening to these very words.

Lest we miss it (v. 31—“*now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out*”) twice Jesus says these events will happen **now**. The judgment of the world (the flip side of the salvation of God’s people), the defeat and casting out of Satan, the exaltation of the suffering servant who gives himself for sinners, the drawing of all people unto himself—all of these things—begin with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This means that with the coming of his Passion (as confirmed on the day of Pentecost), the last days have begun. The world has been in the last days ever since.

Therefore, we are now living in the final period of human history, in the tension between the **already** (what God has accomplished in Christ) and the **not yet** (the final consummation, when the dead are raised, all people stand before God on the day of judgment, and God creates a new heaven and earth). All of this true by virtue of the fact Jesus’ hour has come. His disciples will struggle mightily in the next few days trying to understand all of this and make sense of the conflicting categories Jesus has given them (a Davidic conquering king, and a lowly suffering servant) which are very difficult to reconcile before the events of Good Friday and Easter.

So, little of this makes sense *before* Jesus actually brings these events to pass. Hearing Jesus say all of these seemingly conflicting things, we learn in verse 34 that, “*the crowd answered him, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?’*” These are the right questions to ask, and they come from people who have obviously been listening carefully to the difficult things Jesus has been telling them.

The first thing which confuses them is their expectation that the Messiah's kingdom is everlasting. Yet, Jesus is speaking like a man who knows he is about to die. Isaiah 9:6-7 promises that "*to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*" If Isaiah is correct, how then can Jesus be that one who will suffer and die? The Messiah will remain with Israel forever! Jesus had just entered Jerusalem in triumph as the Messiah was supposed to do. How can he depart from Israel? The answer to this question will only become clear after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Only then will this make sense and the conflicting themes find their final resolution.

Their second question is "how is the Son of Man to be lifted up? The people seem to make the connection between Jesus' future glorification and his being lifted up. Is Jesus telling them that he must die? When Jesus declares himself to be the "Son of Man" the Jews were still wrestling with how, exactly, this title fit with Jesus' messianic claims. The people want to know who is this "Son of Man." They probably connected Jesus' comment about "being lifted up" to the prophecy in Isaiah of the suffering servant. But the Son of Man (at least the figure of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14) was a divine figure who was given an everlasting kingdom. How did this fit with the image of a suffering servant and an eternal messianic reign? In many ways, this is the exact same question put to Jesus in John 10:24 a few months earlier during the Feast of Tabernacles. "*If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*" The difference is that these people were not hostile to Jesus, but truly struggling to understand the connection between these Old Testament figures (a conquering king, an everlasting messianic reign, and a suffering servant), and they were not quite sure how to resolve the seeming conflict between them.

Jesus does not answer their question—knowing that the answer will come in the next few days, and anything he says now will not make sense. But Jesus does warn them that there are going to be great challenges before resolution finally comes. In verses 35-36, Jesus says to the crowds, "*the light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.*" The light (truth)/darkness (slavery to sin) contrast is prominent in this gospel. Because a great time of trial and testing is about to come, it is imperative that Jesus warn his hearers of how easy it will be to get tripped up by darkness once the light (himself) is gone. The crowds may not fully understand how the things that Jesus has told them will fit together, but Jesus tells them to believe that they will, and that they should believe (trust) that these things will come to pass, and when they do, everything Jesus has promised became a reality, just as he said.

What do we take with us from this passage? The most obvious thing is that Jesus has revealed the manner of his death (as suffering servant) "*when I am lifted up.*" He was referring, of course, to his cross which will save us from our sins, guarantee judgment upon the whole world, and destroy the kingdom of Satan—who can do nothing afterwards but engage in a sort of guerilla war against the kingdom of God. Although Jesus has come "*for this purpose, I have come to this hour,*" he is deeply troubled by the knowledge of what lies ahead. Nevertheless, the Passover Lamb will be "lifted up" and willingly lay down his life for his sheep, bearing the wrath of God which each of us deserves.

Meanwhile, there is much for Jesus to teach his disciples, and this he will do. His hour has come. He will die for his people. And whenever we "lift him up" through the proclamation of his cross, he will indeed draw people unto himself.