

Dr. David Turner, Gospel of John, Session 14, John 12:1-50

© 2024 David Turner and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. David Turner in his teaching on the Gospel of John. This is session 14, Back in Jerusalem for the Last Time, John 12:1-50.

We've just been looking at John 11 and the magnificent, climactic miracle of John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

We're not surprised that this led many of the bystanders to believe in Jesus. What is amazing and disappointing about the incident is that the resurrection causes the religious leaders to resolve all the more to do away with Jesus. In response to this, Jesus has gone away to a sort of obscure location known as Ephraim, just as he did before John 11, gone away briefly to Bethany beyond the Jordan.

It's becoming necessary for Jesus to walk away from Jerusalem for a time just to maintain his own personal safety. So as John 11 concludes, Jesus has gone to Ephraim, leaving folks in Jerusalem as Passover approaches in a state of suspense. They're trying to understand what has happened to Jesus.

They're wondering whether he is at the festival at all. Chapter 11, verse 56, based on their last meeting, the council has decided that they've passed the word around that those who see Jesus should report it so that he might be arrested. So, we come then to chapter 12 and Jesus returns to Bethany, to Lazarus and Mary Martha's home, and then enters the city.

The synoptic tradition begins to come back into the picture for John as well here, as we have what's commonly called the triumphal entry. So as is our custom, we look first at the narrative flow of the chapter, and then we'll come back and explore some of the issues in the chapter. So, Jesus has now returned from Ephraim to Bethany, just east of the Mount of Olives, and we have the anointing by Mary at the dinner with Lazarus.

From here on out, Lazarus is going to be closely associated with Jesus, so much so that the Jewish leaders are going to have to resolve not only to kill Jesus but to also kill Lazarus because Lazarus is like exhibit A of Jesus' prowess and of the signs that he has done and of the reality of his message and his power as the Father's agent on earth. So, if we're going to do away with Jesus, we have to do away with Lazarus, sort of thing almost like in a gangster movie where you have to kill all the witnesses in order to keep yourself from getting in trouble, unfortunately. So, Jesus does enter Jerusalem with great fanfare, and here we pick back up with the synoptic tradition of the triumphal entry, and we have an incident where some folks identified as Greeks,

we'll talk a bit more later about who these people were and what they might represent in the gospel.

It's a bit of a puzzling part of the chapter. So, these people who are Greeks want to see Jesus. It's not clear whether they actually saw him or not.

I would think they would have, but the text doesn't explicitly state that. Then when the chapter has perhaps what to me is the saddest part of the Gospel of John, where the author looks back and reflects upon all that Jesus has said and all that Jesus has done and ponders the fact that there's not been a rousing positive response to him. And so, the one verse that is really, I think in many ways, the saddest verse in the Gospel of John, almost a sort of a plaintive wail sort of a thing.

12:37, even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. It's like, what are you going to do? He's done everything he can do. He's done it time after time, year after year, festival after festival, yet in spite of all the things he's done, preeminently the seven signs culminating in the raising of Lazarus, yet they would not believe in him.

So, we come away from that thinking defeated. However, immediately Isaiah's prophecy is brought into the picture. And so, the whole thing is attributed to the providence of God.

And God is nevertheless not surprised by this. And so, everything is in God's hands. So, we move from then that sort of last summary of Jesus' ministry and a theological approach to it, and acknowledging that many did believe, though they wouldn't go public with their faith.

Then the last part of John's Gospel from chapter 12, verses 44 to 50, when you read it, it almost sounds like a brief summary of everything that Jesus has taught so far. So, let's read it together and just remember everything that has gone up to this point and use this as the summary of the public ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Whoever believes in me, beginning of verse 44, I should say, not 47, whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.

The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I've come into the world as a light so that the one who believes in me should not stay in darkness. If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person for I didn't come into the world to judge the world, but to save the world.

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and who does not accept my words. The very words that I have spoken will condemn them on the last day. For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken.

I know that his command leads to eternal life. So, whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say." So, this is the flow of John's narrative concluding in these words from verses 44 to 50 that, to my mind at least, sort of repeat what Jesus has been saying all along in this gospel in a sort of a nutshell. So now we turn and look at the passage again more thematically and just notice what's really happening as these things develop in John.

So unfortunately, we've been saying before that the simmering conflict is coming to a head, and I think this chapter shows that it has reached its final status. So we won't take the time to go back and look at all these texts that we list here on the slide, but as you know going back to Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem when he cleared the temple and his authority is challenged there, repeatedly throughout the ensuing chapters we find that negative response to Jesus is building, and even though we're reminded throughout the gospel that more and more people believe in him, the impression is quite clear that more and more and more and more people are not believing in him, and it's the more important people who are running things who don't believe in him. At least most of them don't because we have Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who evidently were at least mildly by this time in favor of Jesus.

So, the simmering conflict is coming to a head and the raising of Lazarus, which you would think ought to make things better, in a sense only makes things worse because it does lead to another group of people coming to believe in Jesus, but it also only heightens the resolve and the anger of those who don't believe in Jesus. So you have more believers according to 11:45, but you have more motivation on the part of those who don't want Jesus to get rid of him, because the raising of Lazarus is portrayed as something that has excited the followers of Jesus all the more, and there's already lots of people coming in for the Passover feast, and so they're hearing this news that there is a prophet in town who just raised a person from the dead. They can see the person who was raised from the dead, and so now the Pharisees are in trouble because they have to not only do away with Jesus but also with the one whom Jesus raised from the dead.

So, after seeing texts repeatedly in John where Jesus has said, my hour has not yet come, beginning way back in Cana of Galilee in chapter 2, now we finally have reference to the fact that Jesus' hour has come. John chapter 12, verse 23, Jesus says, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified very truly. I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds.

So, Jesus is now speaking pretty realistically and plainly about his time being short and his death being quite near. Another thing that is interesting about this chapter is the event that precedes the text that I just read. We're told in John chapter 12 and verse 20 that there were some Greeks amongst those who had come up to worship

at the festival and that they came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee with the request, sir, we would like to see Jesus.

So, Philip went to see Andrew, and Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. This seems to be a bit odd because there is no ensuing verse that says, in response to the inquiry, Jesus went out to meet them and said, nothing like that. So, it's just sort of left hanging, and what Jesus says after it does not directly speak to the question of whether the red-letter verses, if you want to call them that, from verses 23 to 28, whether he has gone out and spoken these words to these Greeks who want to see him, or whether this is just something he is saying to the disciples in reflection on the request of the Greeks.

So, who are these people? Who are these Greeks who come to worship at Passover? They could be folks who are just there on a pilgrimage, and they are perhaps just curiosity seekers, tourists, that sort of thing, I suppose. They've heard about the Passover in Jerusalem, about how jammed up the city is, and how, wow, you ought to go see that, and perhaps they've come just out of that sort of curiosity. I suppose that's possible.

It would seem much more likely, though, that they went up to worship at the festival, and that they were there as believers in God in some sense. This would raise the question, then, whether they were Jewish people who had more or less been living out in the Diaspora and had become more Hellenized and become accustomed to the Greek culture, who spoke mainly the Greek language, who were reading the Torah in the Greek translation, what we now look back on and know as the Septuagint, and had perhaps become a bit more open in their understanding of the law than the Jews who lived in Palestine at the time. Perhaps people like the ones described in Acts chapter 6 later on, were having issues with the more Hebraized Jews in the early church.

So, you recall there, there was a debate, a discussion, a problem between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraistic Jews, so to speak, the ones who had become more accustomed to Hellenistic culture and the ones who were more strict in Palestine. Perhaps we have that here. The wording is slightly different in Greek, but it's possible, I suppose.

I think it's perhaps more likely that these people are Gentiles, not Jews, but Gentiles who aren't coming to Jerusalem out of curiosity, but they're coming to Jerusalem because they have come to know the God of Israel, and they are the type of people who are described in the book of Acts as fearers of God or God-fearers. You may have already read about them in the book of Acts. I tend to wonder whether an individual that we meet in the Gospel of Luke is also to be viewed as a God-fearer, though the term is not used to describe him.

In Luke chapter 7, the man, the centurion, whom the Jewish leaders say to Jesus, he loves our nation and he built our synagogue. It would seem that someone would have done such a thing only because they had come to believe in the God of Israel in some sense of the word. As we know from the book of Acts, probably beginning at chapter 13, where Paul says to the audience he's speaking to at Antioch of Pisidia, men and brethren, he says, and those amongst you who fear God, as he begins the sermon in Acts chapter 13.

And as the sermon in Acts chapter 13 concludes, as you may already be well aware, there's the interesting positive response of Gentiles in the audience to all of that. We read about it in verse 42 and following, Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue. The people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath when the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism.

It's that term, the NIV, which I'm reading has devout converts to Judaism that I'm talking about here as the God-fearers. One wonders whether that is a good translation, to be honest with you, because converts to Judaism would have been regarded as Jews. But this text is distinguishing this group from Jews, so it's my opinion, it's more likely that these were Gentile people who had become interested in what went on in the synagogue, had come to appreciate the God of Israel and believed in the God of Israel rather than the pagan deities or the emperor worship of their own culture.

So, they were believers in God, but probably they had not yet been converted to Judaism, which in the case of men would have required circumcision, and in the case of men and women alike at this time would have required a baptism of sorts, a ritual immersion to enter the Jewish faith. In my opinion, these people were not converts to Judaism, but they were the next thing to it. They were certainly not identified, strictly speaking, as unclean Gentiles any longer.

So, these people, however, we want to translate this term in Acts 13:43, many of these people whom Paul was speaking to in the synagogue there, say they followed Paul and Barnabas who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. And if we would take the time, we would find a few other places in Acts where this same type of person is referred to on more than one occasion. For instance, Acts 13:48, when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and they honored the word of the Lord, and they all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

I don't know that these Gentiles were just raw Gentiles off the street. More likely they were Gentiles who had come to believe in the God of Israel and who were already acculturized to some extent to Judaism, and they understood whereof Paul spoke when he gave the message in Acts 13 about the history of Israel and how Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel's hope. At any rate, these somewhat mysterious Greeks

who show up here in John 12:20 are most likely Gentile God-fearers who are there to worship God at Passover with their Jewish friends.

The question is, why is this introduced at this point in the narrative? Why would it particularly even need to be mentioned at this point, particularly when we're just left hanging about whether Jesus actually specifically came back and spoke with them or not? As we think about this, here are some considerations. At this point, Jesus has done basically all he is going to do, perhaps all you would say he can do for Israel. His public ministry to Israel is complete.

Yet he has already alluded to the fact that he has other sheep who are not of this fold, and he wants to bring them together with the Jewish believers in him so that there is just one flock and one sheepfold. Added to that, the words that Caiaphas spoke as a political strategy, which John sees a different, more spiritual meaning, in chapter 11, verse 52. He prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, 11:51, and not only for that nation, 11:52 says, but for the scattered children of God to bring them together and make them one.

So perhaps in light of that, there is an emphasis here at this point, as Jesus' ministry is nearing its end and he has spoken fully to Israel. We've had these hints that Jesus is interested in other nations besides Israel. Perhaps this just ties into that theme.

So, if this is the case, then these Gentiles are anticipating the intended universal audience of the story of Jesus. So, when we see John coming to its conclusion, we now have certain, certainly implicitly, we know that in the synoptic tradition we have stated explicitly that the message of Jesus is to be taken to all the nations. In the gospel of John, we don't exactly have that stated explicitly as the apostles' commission as we do in the synoptic tradition, but perhaps this is John's way of dropping hints to that effect.

John does sort of say things in a symbolic or muted way at times, and perhaps this is exactly what we have going on here. In any event, there are many texts in John's we have listed at the bottom of the slide here, which show us that God intends the gospel to reach out to everybody. Jesus is, after all, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, not of the Jews, in chapter 1, verse 29.

And it's that God so loves the world in John 3:16, not simply the descendants of Abraham. God certainly cares about the Samaritans, according to chapter 4. Jesus is the bread of life, which is given for the life of the world in chapter 6. Jesus is not the light of Israel in 8, he is indeed the light of the world. The term world in John is an interesting term, we'll have reason to discuss it a bit later in our videos, but I think this is showing us that God is certainly interested not just in Israel, but in all humanity.

We have some very interesting things going on in John 12 about biblical fulfillment, not least the text that is cited in the triumphal entry, which we're familiar with perhaps already from the synoptic tradition, John 12, verse 13. As Jesus came into Jerusalem, the crowd took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna, which I think essentially means save us now. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, blessed is the King of Israel.

So, Jesus comes into town riding a donkey, again, and the reference to that in John verse 15 is from Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9. So, we have the same text cited in the synoptic tradition to describe the triumphal entry. It says in John's interpretive remark here in 12.16, at first his disciples did not understand all this, only after Jesus was glorified did they realize these things had been written about him, and that these things had been done for him. So, I think what this is saying is that only in retrospect did Jesus' disciples understand the true significance of Psalm 118 and Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9, as it applied to the coming of Jesus.

Another interesting thing about this particular note at the triumphal entry is that in verse 17, it says that the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. And now Lazarus is like exhibit A of Jesus' prowess, and so he is the one that is causing a great deal of enthusiasm for Jesus. Another thing that we need to speak about here briefly is how in the conclusion to the chapter, all of the signs of Jesus are being reflected upon in verse 37, and the way in which it has not resulted in everybody believing.

So, the fact that there's been a muted response to Jesus, a divided response, and many people have not believed in him, is taken by John to be a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah. So, we have then in John 12:38, the citation of Isaiah 53, verse 1, Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Then John makes another editorial comment. For this reason, they were not able to believe.

They could not believe because as Isaiah says elsewhere, he blinded their eyes and he hardened their hearts so they can neither see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them. And then John chapter 12, verse 40 is being drawn from Isaiah chapter 6 around verse 9. Interestingly, John says in verse 41 that Isaiah said this because he saw literally his glory, and NIV of course, takes, I think correctly, his glory as referring to Jesus and translates Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. Stop and think about that one for just a moment.

When we have Isaiah in chapter 6, seeing God high and lifted up the angelic beings are saying kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. For John to say that they were seeking Jesus and that Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus is part and parcel. It's tantamount.

It's really just saying he is the Lord of Hosts lifted up in glory. Another clear text about the high view of Jesus, is the divinity of Jesus in John's gospel. So back to the theme of the muted response to Jesus.

The first text quoted Isaiah 53 to explain why not too many people believed, doubled down on in verse 39 saying they could not believe because of Isaiah chapter 6, verse 9. Then verse 42 sort of takes the other tack. After saying many did not believe because they could not believe, verse 42 says well actually at the same time many even among the leaders did believe in him. So, John is taking us in one direction and he's taking us in a different direction.

And so, I think we're sort of led here by the way the text goes back and forth to what we've already read at the beginning of chapter 7. There was a totally divided response about Jesus and certainly many did not believe in him and perhaps fewer did, but the fewer who did believe in him were not insignificant. So, John tells us here in verse 42 many believed in him and he says even among the leaders. Now stop and think about that for a moment.

The only one of the leaders that we have any inkling had faith in Jesus was Nicodemus. Nicodemus indeed asked them to at least have some judicial uh honesty and integrity in chapter 7 at the end in the way they thought of Jesus. And we're going to find in chapter 9 that Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea who's identified as another member of the council, he and Nicodemus bury the body of Jesus.

We have no other explicit indication in John that others amongst the leaders of Israel believed in him. Perhaps there were other people, perhaps John just wants us to think of those two individuals. So, we have a statement made that many did not believe, they couldn't believe.

Well, some did believe even from the leaders, but then it explains why we don't know much about them. Middlewood verse 42, because of the Pharisees they could not openly acknowledge their faith for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue. They love human praise more than praise for God.

This takes us then to a note that we've been sounding over and over in John. I hope you're not getting tired of this if you've looked at a lot of the other videos. The reason we've talked about this a lot is because John talks about it a lot and raises the question and so we continue to be needing to reflect upon this and understand it.

We're told again here in chapter 12 verse 11 that many believed in Jesus coming into the triumphal entry. Even on account of Lazarus, many were believing in Jesus according to chapter 12 verse 11, which in itself is good but was all the more reason

from the standpoint of the leaders that they were wanting to kill Jesus. So, they wanted to kill Jesus because they raised Lazarus from the dead and they were making plans to kill Lazarus as well because he was such of a testimony for the power of Jesus.

So, they loved human praise more than praise from God. So here we are again with the issue of ambiguous faith. Many believed but they would not publicly acknowledge Jesus.

Again, many texts in John speak to this question. I suppose the question that we want to ask is, were they true believers or not? I'm thankful that when I think about questions like this it's not up to me to decide. I don't have to know that question.

I just have to keep my own heart right with God and the people who come around me and my circle of ministry. I try to be honest and genuine about the weakness of our faith and the need we have to persevere in the faith and to encourage one another no matter what to continue following Jesus. So, I don't know how to categorize or predict or exactly know where these people stand before God.

I don't think John wants us to know that necessarily. He would have been more clear about it. One thing that seems clear in John is that he wants people to follow Jesus and to be fruitful and faithful and remain, and abiding in Christ.

Many people who believed in Jesus in some sense of the word did not do that. Most clearly in John chapter 8 in the latter part of that chapter. So how we interpret all these folks, I'm not sure just in terms of the literature in John.

We come to John, most of us, with some type of systematic theology of the plan of God in terms of the perseverance in the faith. I would just say to you, think about what you've been taught in your church about perseverance in the faith and to secure the believer and come to a conclusion that does justice to what the text is saying here. The main thing I think the text is saying to us is what we perhaps are made to think about in chapter 13 when Jesus says to the disciples, one of you will betray me.

So instead of thinking that we have the capacity to judge the faith of other people and know exactly what's happening to them, perhaps we should be like the disciples in John 13 who when they were confronted with the betrayal essentially looked around at each other and thought, could it be me? So, it's healthy I think now and then to ask ourselves that very question. Could it be me? So, we leave John 12 behind by remembering where Jesus was in this chapter as he thought about the presence of these Greeks who had come and wanted to see him, perhaps as a sign that his ministry was coming to a conclusion. And we have a text here that pretty much reminds us of the synoptic tradition, the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus says, now is my soul troubled? What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this very reason that I came to this hour, so I can't say that. What can I say? Father, glorify your name.

So, we have a heavenly voice at this point which confirms what Jesus says. I have glorified it and will glorify it again. There was some sort of an audible nature of that response to Jesus heard by the crowd.

Some interpreted it as thunder. Some interpreted it as an angel speaking to Jesus. If Jesus is our example in John, as it is apparent he is in all the Gospels, and if when he said, as the Father sent me, so send I you, that had more to do than just with him distributing the Spirit to the disciples, then perhaps I think that you and I ought to be able to echo the words of John chapter 12, verse 27.

Should we say to God, save us from whatever difficulty we're facing? No, we should say, Father, glorify your name.

This is Dr. David Turner in his teaching on the Gospel of John. This is session 14, Back in Jerusalem for the Last Time, John 12:1-50.