

A Kernel of Wheat

John 12:20-50

KV: 24

“I tell you the truth, 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.”

When I was a young boy, my grandmother gave me a little patch of soil in her garden where I could grow strawberries. I was always amazed at how the tiny little seeds came up through the soil as little sprouts, then a few weeks later you would see little green strawberry fruit. When they eventually ripen, they became red and delicious. In this passage Jesus describes for us the death of a kernel of wheat. Unlike a strawberry, a kernel of wheat is a staple, it is a crop that is necessary for the survival of a society. Jesus tells us in our key verse, “I tell you the truth, 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.” A kernel of wheat looks like a giant piece of brown rice. While it remains on the stalk, it remains only a single seed, and might be picked off and eaten later on. But if it falls to the ground, something miraculous begins to happen. The shell of the seed breaks open, the seed “dies,” it is no longer its old self, and roots begin to form. Then a sprout shoots up out of the soil, and in a few weeks it is a full grown stalk with 50 seeds of its own. It looks nothing like the seed it once was, but came from the seed, and now has more seeds of its own which can reproduce. The seed had to die before becoming fruitful. Jesus used this principle of death we see in nature to illustrate his own death, and to teach us about a kind of death which results in fruit. Jesus teaches us about his death, and how it produces life, and how by following his example, we too may become kernels of wheat that can produce many seeds.

Look at v.20-21, “Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’” Here in this chapter, we have come to the last day of Jesus’ public ministry. A few months earlier, Jesus had performed his greatest miracle – he raised a man from the dead and the word spread all over the region. He did these things to prove that He was the Son of God, and people from many nations came to see him. Jesus was born a Jew, and he was called King of the Jews, but God sent Him so that people of all nations would see Him and believe in Him – and if you look around you today, I am encouraged that this church is made up of many different people, united by a desire to see Jesus.

Jesus welcomed them, and replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Think about how everyone must have felt, especially the new guests who had never seen Jesus before. What could be going on in their minds? What could they be thinking when he said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified?” What other miracle would Jesus do now, that was greater than raising someone from the dead? Earlier that day, as Jesus was on his way into Jerusalem, a great crowd had gone out to meet him, taking palm branches in their hands and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!” Some people were already in eager anticipation that Jesus would liberate Israel from under Roman rule, and that He would be their king and establish their kingdom on earth. Israel would be the premier nation in all the world, and everyone else would be subject to them. This was their desire, but Jesus’ desire was very different.

Jesus gives the people a hint as to how he would be glorified, in v.24. Can we all please read v.24, “I tell you the truth, 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.” Jesus hints that he would be glorified, not by reigning over the world just yet, but by dying. What, you ask? Really? Aren’t the enemies supposed to die, not the Christ?! Well, the crowd thought the same thing. In v.34, they spoke up and said, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever,” they could not believe that the Christ will die. So what does Jesus mean by this?

Look at v.25, “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” The kernel of wheat that remains only a single seed is like the man who loves his life, and the kernel that falls to the ground is compared to the man who hates his life in this world. It will produce many seeds, and he will keep his life forever. This seems like a paradox – how can a person who loves their life lose it? Jesus told a parable one time of a rich fool (in Luke 12:13-21). “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” Do you love your life? Is the dream, or goal, is the aim of your life to get rich quick, and then take life easy? When you have no concept of God, when you do not know God, you cannot help but to think that this life is it. This life is all you got, this life is all you know, and so you try to make the best of it. But this is the great lie, this is the great deception to cover your eyes by the prince of the world. The prince of this world is Satan, and he would like nothing more than for you to doubt that God exists, and allure you with the treasures of this world.

The other choice, then, is to hate your life in this world. There are some people who seem to hate life already. They might have a terrible job, a stressful semester in school, or live a miserable existence. You may know someone like that. Verse 25, about the man who hates his life, is not talking about that type of person, although there is hope for someone like that too. Verse 25 is talking about a man who hates his life here, because he is aware of a better life outside of here. He is aware of a better life after his death. He is aware of heaven, and the things of earth have grown strangely dim. This is a person who is aware of the glory of God.

Here is a story of one man who became aware of the glory of God. His name is Isaiah, and he lived around 2,700 years ago, and he is one of the greatest prophets in the Bible. One day, Isaiah had a vision, and saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. He saw angels flying above God, with their heads and feet covered, calling out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” When Isaiah saw this, he cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. (Isa 6:1-5).” When Isaiah came face to face with God, the One true Holy God, he saw his own unholiness, he saw his own sinfulness, and cried out of anguish. Even the angels covered their own heads and feet, because they were in the presence of the Holy God. One effect

of seeing the glory of God is that you realize how great heaven is, another effect of seeing God is the revelation of how sinful you are.

Isaiah cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” We must know that God is a holy God, and he is perfect. He is perfectly good, and when compared to him we look perfectly rotten. You may think that you’re a good person, but if you will let the light of God shine on you, you will see that you are unclean. Sometimes when you wash dishes, you have to hold it up to the light to see those invisible food bits stuck on the plates. That’s why people will avoid God, that’s why they will deny God, and that’s even why people hate God, because he reveals our sin. The apostle Paul says this in Romans: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death! (Rom 7:21-24).” Those who know God will understand that there is a war raging against our minds, which is why they also hate their lives in this world. They see that they are living in a body of death, and yearn to be clothed in a body of life!

Who can save us? Who will rescue us? Who will save you?! Look at v.27a, the first part: “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’?” Jesus here reveals his true humanity. His heart is troubled. His heart is in anguish. He feels the temptation to save himself, there is a war at work in his mind. It is written in Isa 53:10 over 700 years ago from this time, “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.” Jesus is faced with the prospect of death. He knew he was to be handed over to the Jews, then to the Romans to be violently and painfully killed. But what did he say? Listen to his resolve: “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? NO, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” Jesus, the Son of God, would deny himself the privilege of saving his own life. Why? To glorify God.

And do you think God is pleased with that kind of obedience? You better believe he is! I like how there is an exclamation point in verse 28, “Father, glorify your name!” (*And then a moment of silence in anticipation...*) Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there heard it and said it had thundered, others said an angel had spoken to him. God, in response to Jesus’ cry, thunders a glorious response, affirming that Jesus is his Son (Jesus cried, “Father”), and that Jesus is carrying out his will. These are facts that happened in history. John records that many heard the voice of God responding to his One and only Son Jesus.

Now, how is Jesus glorified? And how is God glorified through his death? Quoting again from Isaiah, we see how Jesus is glorified, “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession with the transgressors. (Isa

53:11-12).” When you see yourself in the light of God’s glory, you know without a doubt that you are a sinner. I know without a doubt that I am a sinner, and I have done things I feel guilty about. Jesus came, so that he could be a guilt offering for us. Jesus came, so he would bear the full brunt of our punishment, our crimes against God in heart and mind. It is because of what Jesus did that our sins are forgiven. It is because of what Jesus did and God’s compassion that blots out our transgressions. When we will be judged at the last day, God will weigh the all the deeds and thoughts of our lives. His case against us is huge. But because of what Jesus did, God blots them out of his book and remembers our transgressions no more. God punished Jesus for our sake, so that we would be saved from the wrath of God. But because Jesus suffered to save us, God would reward him all the more. Sometimes God may put us through suffering for his purposes, but if we are faithful, he is faithful to reward us in the same measure. There is a saying that the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” I know that the true church in China is flourishing today because of the people who gave their lives for her in days gone by. Jesus’ inheritance for his death are the souls of all those he saved. 1 Pet 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Jesus is glorified by those who belong to him, who declare his praise for calling us into his wonderful light.

How is God glorified? This was God’s will. It was God’s plan all along to save us who are lost. It was God’s plan to rescue sinners, and Jesus submitted to his will. A few chapters back, in John 6:40, it is written, “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” Who here can truly love their enemies? Who can die for a righteous person? Who can die for their enemy’s sake? “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 6:8).” The Lord Almighty, Creator of the heavens and the earth, came down as a man. Our King suffered and died for us. Worthy is He who gave us life, worthy is the Lamb who was slain for our salvation! The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell.

How shall we be like Jesus, the kernel of wheat that fell to the ground and died? First, you need to repent. Repent of your love of your life in this world. You can see how the Pharisees loved their lives in v.42-43, “At the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.” Without repenting from this, we cannot even begin to believe. John says, “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God (John 5:44).” We should also repent of our lack of faith, as Peter spoke to a crowd in the temple of God, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord (Acts3:19).” Last week, I needed to repent of my lukewarm love for my Lord. I was convicted when I would consistently show up late for Friday meetings and Bible studies, often because I was taking care of something that probably could have been done later. Now, I should not do things to receive praise from men – the purpose of coming to meetings on time should not be to please men, but I repent, and try to make it to meetings on time because I want to express my love for Jesus by loving the things that he loves, and being a good steward.

Second, you need to believe. You need to have faith in Jesus and in his words. Look at v.34, “The crowd spoke up, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?’” They knew that Jesus was the Son of Man, that’s why crowds came to him. There was something of a belief in his miracles. But they failed to listen to his words. He clearly said, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself (v.34).” And to avoid any confusion, John also makes it clear that “He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (v.33).” They were able to find in the Law that Christ would live forever, but they ignored the parts about where he would suffer and die.

There is a serious danger in unbelief. Look at v 37-38, “Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed.’” Isaiah prophesied that even when Jesus, their Savior, was right in front of their faces, they would not believe. Part of the reason was that this had to happen, to fulfill the word of God. Jesus needed to be handed over to be killed and died. So part of their unbelief comes from God hardening their hearts, but part of it is also their own responsibility, because they loved praise from men. So Isaiah says, remember this is 700 years back from this time, “He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so that they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them.” Here is the danger if you do not believe: look at v.47-48, “As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. **For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.** There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.”

Are you content to say, “I don’t believe in God?” Are you content to say, “I don’t need God, maybe not right now?” Today, you heard Jesus say, “For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” Now is the time for mercy, now is the time for salvation, for God may demand your life at a time you do not expect, and will come at a time you do not know. Heb 2:2-3 says, “For the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” How will you escape if you ignore such a great salvation? Now is the time for mercy, throw yourself to the mercy of our Lord, submit yourself to Jesus, or one day, you may find yourself at the judgment seat of the Lord, and he will say, “Why did you not believe my words?” That very word Jesus spoke will condemn you at the last day.

The third point in being like a kernel of wheat is obedience. Notice that repentance and faith come first. First, repent, and have faith, for through these things you will receive the Holy Spirit which will help you obey the commands of God. You may find yourself losing interest in the things of this world, and gaining interest in the things of God. We cannot obey under our own strength, but God is our strength, and he will help us to keep his commands. To know the commands of God you have to know the word of God, which is the Bible. And when you learn them, commit them to your heart and obey. Jesus is the supreme example of obedience to God. Look at v.49-50, “For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” Jesus, who was God, submitted himself fully to

God. He never acted or spoke out of his own initiative, but he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! He submitted himself so that he can glorify God; and that should be the goal of all our obedience: to give all the glory to God. Ultimately, God's commands lead to eternal life. That is how we can be fruitful, leading into the fourth and last point,

Be fruitful. Again, God will bring the fruit. Someone may plant the seed, someone else may water it, but God makes it grow (1 Cor 3:6). In repentance, faith and obedience, God will bring the fruit. You will receive fruit in this life. Gal 5:22 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." This isn't always a smooth road or an easy ride, remember that we are still sinners. However, God will sanctify you, cleanse you, transform you and conform you to the image of his Son Jesus Christ. Sometimes it may hurt a bit, but you will grow to be more like Jesus, and as you grow to be more like Jesus, you will influence others to also grow in Christ. Isn't that amazing how the principle of the kernel of wheat works?! Jesus, the perfect Son of God, died so that we may also be made perfect. He died so that he would receive spiritual children, and an inheritance into the kingdom of God. And when we follow this principle and die to ourselves, we produce, by God's grace, spiritual children in the kingdom of God.

As you receive blessing in this life, remember that there are far more glorious blessings in the life ahead. If you have died to this life, you will rise with Christ. If you do not have Christ, then death will be the end for you. He cannot receive you if you do not receive him. You need to repent and turn to God. But if you have Christ, then death is not the end, it is only the start of a glorious new beginning. You will be resurrected with a glory unimaginable, and brought into full unity with God. I will end with a quotation from 1 Cor 15, on the blessings at the resurrection of being a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies:

"But someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?' How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body...so it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body...Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:35-38, 42-44, 58)"