

Here Am I, Lord . . . Bury Me

John 12:22-33

Introduction

It was early in the morning on July the fourth of 1952. With fog hanging thick in the air, a young woman, named Florence Chadwick, waded into the water off of Catalina Island. She intended to become the first woman to swim the channel from the island to the California coast. Long distance swimming was not new to Florence, as she had already become the first woman to swim the English Channel – in both directions. She swam for fifteen hours in the fog shrouded, numbing cold, shark infested water, but then, asked to be taken out. She was just thirty minutes shy of her goal. Later, she said in an interview, “If I could only have seen the land, I might have made it.”

It was not the cold, or the exhaustion, or the fear of sharks that caused her to be taken out of the water without reaching her goal – it was the fog.

I am convinced that the reason more and more Christians are asking to be taken out of the waters of growth and challenge is not because they are cold, or exhausted, or afraid of sharks, or lack support – but because a fog has settled in. It is a fog that has obscured our vision of God’s goal.

We are, as Howard Hendricks once said in a class, “like a poor photograph. The Christian community is overexposed to the light and underdeveloped.”

The blessings can become a curse. We are inundated, today, with books, seminars, conferences, sermons, tapes, pamphlets, and lectures on the “how to’s” and the “wherefore’s” and the “whatsoever’s”. Underneath it all, we have lost sight of the goal.

We need to clear the fog and go back to God’s basic goal.

Two of God’s Unchangeable Goals

John, chapter 12, beginning with verse 22, serves as a divine fog remover which clears the picture perfectly. From this chapter, two irrevocable goals are clearly discernable.

Goal #1 – God’s goal for His Son is that He experience . . .

1. Goal number one – God’s goal for His Son is that He experience death on a cross.

Goal #2 – God’s goal for His children is that they experience . . .

2. Goal number two – God’s goal for His children is that they experience death to self.

Now, in our study of John, chapter 12, verses 1 through 21, we discovered that the Greeks had come to Jesus for an in-depth discussion of his Messianic claims. Perhaps they were wondering if Gentiles had any place in that Messianic Kingdom.

Jesus responds, in verse 23a, saying,

. . . *The hour has come. . .*

Now that is a change from what we have heard Him say in our previous studies of the book of John.

In chapter 2, verse 4b,

. . . *Jesus said, “. . . My hour is not yet come.”*

In chapter 7, verse 30, we read that,

They were seeking therefore to seize Him; and no man laid his hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come.

In chapter 8, verse 20b, we are told,

. . . and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.

Now, in chapter 12, verse 23a,

. . . The hour has come . . .

The hour for what? Well, Christ continues, in verse 23b,

. . . for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Now you would expect Christ to say, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be crucified.”

Right?! But, He says, “. . . for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Jesus Christ was looking past the crucifixion to the final outcome.

Now, look further at verses 27 through 31.

Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, “Father, save Me from this hour”? But for this purpose I came to this hour. “Father, glorify Thy name.” There came therefore a voice out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The multitude therefore, who stood by and heard it, were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, “An angel has spoken to Him.” Jesus answered and said, “This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world shall be cast out.”

He was saying that Satan’s chief weapon against fallen humanity, or death, is about to be defeated forever. Continue to verse 32.

And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.

Notice John’s explanation in verse 33.

But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die.

In other words, Jesus is saying, “You lift me up from the earth onto a Roman cross and you will not silence Me. In fact, that cross will become a lighthouse beacon that will extend a worldwide invitation to follow Me as Messiah. Everything else

aside, My goal for coming to earth was to die on a cross . . . and I’m going to accomplish it.”

Turning the World’s Wisdom On Its Ear

Now, Jesus, in three brief sentences and three principles, forever removes the fog of what God’s goal for His children is, or what it means to follow Him. Oh, how Jesus turns the world’s wisdom on its ear!

Principle #1 – If you want a flourishing life, you have to be willing . . .

1. Principle number one is, if you want a flourishing life, you have to be willing to die.

Look at verse 24.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

The truth is, God’s children are like seeds. Left alone, we are small and insignificant, but His life is within us and, when we die to ourselves, our lives flourish with fruit:

- the fruit of the Spirit,
- the fruit of evangelism,
- the fruit of discipleship, and
- the fruit of salt and light producing effects.

Why It Is Difficult To Volunteer For “Seed Duty”!

“But God, I don’t want to be a seed.”

Do you know why? Do you know why it is somewhat frightening and intimidating to say, “Here am I Lord, bury me”?

I believe there are two primary reasons it is difficult to volunteer to be one of God’s seeds; to volunteer for “seed duty”.

You have to give God the right to determine . . .

- First, you have to give God the right to determine what kind of seed you are and what kind of fruit you will produce.

Down the street from where I live, a family has planted a garden. It is a perfect garden, where everything is neatly arranged and kept. I thought,

“Imagine all those seeds in the ground, just after he has planted them, if they could talk.”

Can you imagine hearing a tomato seed, over in the corner, talking?! It might say, “I don’t want to be a tomato plant when I grow up, I want to be a corn stalk. Now that’s living high in the garden! Man, the corn stalk grows strong and tall, while we have to be propped up with sticks that make me itch. The corn bears more fruit than we do and it is closer to the sunlight. People notice corn. Oh, I want to be corn. I think I can, I think I can . . .”.

“Lord, I’m your seed. You’ve determined what kind I am and what I’ll produce. You’ve made me quiet instead of vocal. You’ve obscured me from sight, rather than put me up front. Here am I Lord, bury me.”

You have to give God the right to plant . . .

- The second reason it is difficult to voluntarily become one of God’s seeds is, because you are then giving God the right to plant you wherever He wants.

“You want to bury me where?! Lord I’m comfortable with my little life. I have a little seed house and a little car to carry me and all my seedlings around in. You want to take me out and bury me?! Surely there must be an easier way to bear fruit!”

And some of you are hiding from God, the gardener. Oh, not overtly, not indignantly, but you have communicated a message from your heart that reads, “This seed is not for burial”.

“And keep away from my little seedlings, as well. I want them close to me, where we can all enjoy our fruitless, barren lives together.”

Perhaps if a little seed could talk, it would complain about being put into the cold, dark earth. But, that is the only way it can ever fulfill its created role; the only way it can flourish with fruit!

On January 12, 1722, Jonathan Edwards, whose preaching brought about the first Great Awakening, wrote in his diary,

I have been before God, and have given myself, all that I am and have, to God; so that I am not, in any respect, my own . . . neither have I any right to this body or any of its members – no right to this tongue, these hands, these feet; no right to these senses, these eyes, these ears, this smell, or this taste.

I have given myself clear away and have not retained any thing as my own.

Edwards was saying, “Lord, I’m volunteering to be a seed in Your hand . . . even though I might want to be somewhere else, doing something else, becoming someone else . . . here am I, bury me.”

So, principle number one is, if you want a flourishing life, you have to be willing to die.

Principle #2 – If you want a fulfilled life, you have to be willing . . .

2. Principle number two is, if you want a fulfilled life, you have to be willing to forfeit control.

Notice verse 25. You need to circle the key word “life”.

He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal.

Now, this verse is difficult to understand, simply because the English reader is at a disadvantage. The word “life,” which appears three times in this verse, is actually two different original words, with two different meanings.

The first two times it appears, it is the word “psuche,” which refers to the life of the mind, emotions, and will. We refer to those as functions of the soul. The last time it appears, it is the word “zoe,” which, when joined with the word “eternal,” refers to divine life.

So, Jesus is saying, “He who loves his own mind, emotions, and will; that is, his own plans, ambitions, and self-interests, will destroy himself.”

Now, you may have noticed the use of strong words, in this verse – “He who love his life . . . and he who hates his life . . .”.

The words, “love” and “hate” are extreme opposites. Jesus used the same terms when He said, in Matthew, chapter 10, verses 37 through 39, paraphrased, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters; yes, even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.”

What does He mean? First, He is using the language of exaggerated contrast. “Hate” means simply, “to love less”. “Love” simply means, “to place first”.

So, we could expand this verse, with what we have just learned, into an amplified translation. Jesus is saying this, “He who gives first place to his own mind, emotions, and will, will destroy himself; but he who gives first place to Me, will, ultimately, experience life worth living forever.”

George Mueller lived in England, several generations ago, and founded orphanages. Once, when he was asked the secret of his ministry, he replied,

There was a day when I died – died to George Mueller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame of my friends; and since then, I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.

What did Mueller do? He forfeited control and, ultimately, lived a fulfilled life!

“Lord, I’ll abandon my will to yours, but first, let me see how it balances in my checkbook; let me see some guarantees that Your plans will really work better than mine.”

The interesting thing is that Jesus Christ never adopted the popular methods of recruitment. Modern recruitment tells you that, if you will sign, enlist, join, you will get what you want. Jesus is telling us that, if we want to serve Him, we will not get to do what we want, we get to do what He wants. And we discover that, in doing what He wants, we actually accomplish what we really want. Following Him liberates us from our selfish society and self-centered natures that constantly advertise for us to do what we want, be what we want, go where we want, and live for what we want.

Think of what He could have said, “Follow Me and I’ll show you some amazing miracles . . . Follow Me and you’ll walk on water . . . Follow Me and you’ll see things you’ve never seen before . . .”.

No! Instead of majoring on the benefits and blessings, the thrills and excitement, the adventure and advantages of being His disciples, Jesus said, “Do you want to follow me?”

“Yes, Lord!”

“Then are you ready to die to your own ambitions? Are you ready to forfeit personal control? . . .”

He is asking for everything!

J. Oswald Sanders included, in his book on discipleship, the story of a village organist in Germany in the early 1800’s. The organist was practicing in the cathedral for the coming Sunday. He was practicing one of the difficult works of Mendelssohn. In his struggling, he did not notice that a stranger had slipped into the cathedral and sat in the dimness of the back pew. After he finished practicing, he got his papers together and was shuffling his way out when he was stopped by the stranger. The stranger asked, “Would you mind if I played?”

The organist said, “Absolutely not! No one touches that organ but me.”

The stranger persisted and persisted, until, finally, reluctantly, the organist said, “Alright, for just a moment or two.”

The stranger slipped onto the bench, took the piece of music that the organist had been struggling with, and he played. The music echoed throughout the whole cathedral.

After he finished, the village organist asked, “What is your name?”

He answered, “My name is Felix . . . Mendelssohn.”

Ladies and gentlemen, we must allow our Master Creator – Musician to slip onto the bench, pull out the stops at His will, select the musical score, determine the speed and volume, press the pedals, glide His hands over the keyboards . . . He is the only one who can really make music out of your life, so get off the bench and let Him play!

That is what hating your life means; that is what being buried means – you abdicate the bench and let Him play.

Principle #3 – If you want to be honored as royalty, you have to be willing . . .

3. Principle number three is, if you want to be honored as royalty, you have to be willing to live like a slave.

If I could add three summary words, it would be these:

- Verse 24, the summary word is “expendability,” “Here am I, Lord, bury me.”
- Verse 25, the summary word is “priority,” “My will is despised in comparison to Your will.”

- Verse 26, provides the word “ownership,” and the key words in this verse are “my servant”.

Let us read verse 26.

If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

Did you notice what a servant does? He serves his master, as the first part of verse 26 says, and then, he follows his master. It is a matter of ownership!

We are facing the results of a subtle shift that has now taken the Christian community by force. A generation ago, the average Christian would pray, “Lord, use me.”

Today, the average Christian prays, “Lord, enrich me.”

Fifty years ago, the common prayer was, “Lord, consume me according to your will.”

Today, “Lord, bless me according to my will.”

The principle of ownership is when God makes the demands and we do the obeying.

The reason I believe we have it turned around is because we expect that wherever we decide to go, God will faithfully tag along; whatever we decide to do, God will loyally stamp it with His approval. If that is true, then God is our servant! But no, wherever He goes, we follow; whatever He decides, we approve and obey.

At a conference in South Carolina, a young woman was giving testimony to her commitment to serve God. In the course of her testimony, she held up a blank sheet of paper, saying that it contained God’s plan for her life. The only writing on it was her signature at the bottom. Then she said, “I have accepted God’s will without knowing what it is, and I am leaving it to Him to fill in the details.”

That woman had become a slave to the ownership of God’s will, and the eternal truth is, she will one day be honored as royalty.

Two of God’s Incentives to Follow His Will

Now, after hearing all that Christ demands from this passage, you and I could tend to be discouraged. Being a disciple is a long haul; it is a rugged task, based on abandonment to God’s will. That is why I believe Jesus slips in a couple of incentives.

Incentive #1 – the promise of . . .

1. Incentive number one is the promise of a special communion.

Look at verse 26a.

If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be . . .

Now, school just ended for the summer. My dear wife has our three elementary school aged children, as well as our seven month old daughter. Summer is an exciting time for moms! So, in order to get the first week of summer started off right, I suggested to my kids that, if they behaved, I would take the three of them to the golfing range. This was not just for me – our family loves to play Putt-Putt golf. You should see us – five fiercely competitive people – we add the score at every other hole to see who is winning. Last time, I won both times. I kept the score! The kids had been begging me to teach them how to hit a golf ball off a tee. I did and now, they hit just like I do. The ball starts out straight and then, it begins to curve toward the woods and lands right in front of the ladies tee! I liked playing with my kids – I could hit the ball further than they could!

Now, if my children had misbehaved all week and run their mother to the ragged edge, they would not have ceased to become our children, although that is a tempting thought! They would have, however, lost an opportunity for some special communion between father and child. That is a loss they would have regretted and, even more, so would I.

They had been looking forward to it all week. Saturday came – and so did *rain*! We drove over in the rain – and we had a blast.

Do you want special communion with the Lord? Look at the condition, in verse 26a, again.

If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be . . .

Special fellowship – for servants only.

Incentive #2 – the promise of . . .

2. Incentive number two is the promise of a coming, special commendation!

Look again at verse 26b.

. . . if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.

That is future tense.

Now, I believe that there will be degrees of rewards in heaven, just as I believe the Bible teaches there are degrees of punishment in hell.

Those of us who have invited Jesus Christ into our lives as Savior may live more obediently than others. God notices and has determined, what we call, the bema seat to reward us according to our deeds.

For some, they will see their lives burn up before them, as wood, hay, and stubble; that is, their lives amounted for nothing and never brought any glory to God. Others will receive rewards of precious gems; crowns to give back as gifts to our sovereign Lord.

That is the incentive Jesus uses, in verse 26b, for prospective seeds.

. . . if anyone serves Me, the Father [takes note and] will honor him.

“Honor” is the word “timao,” in the Greek, which refers to “reward; compensation; esteem”.

The best way to illustrate this thought is from the graduation line. Everyone who graduates is excited. Every one of the graduates that we have in our church are honored – because they have graduated. But walking in that graduation line, there are some who have cause for special joy. These are the ones who have received the reward of honors (cum laude), high honors (magna cum laude), or highest honors (summa cum laude). And then, from among them, there is one who receives the special honor of being valedictorian. That is a different depth of joy altogether.

We will all be thrilled to be on the border of heaven – but there will be special commendation for some!

Expendability, priority, and ownership

Expendability, priority, and ownership – those three words have the unique capability of clearing away the fog.

- Expendability - “I’m expendable – do with me what You want. You’ve given me a spiritual gift to be used in Your assembly – Your church. I haven’t been doing anything but sitting! I am willing to serve.”
- Priority – “You become my priority, so that I can say, “I will seek first Your kingdom, not mine. You’ve given me financial resources to be used in the ministry of your church. I haven’t given anything really – I’m too busy financing my own kingdom. I’ll start financing Yours – You’re first.”
- Ownership – “You take ownership of me Lord. You are no longer treated as my servant, I am Yours.”

And Jesus says, “If you will do these things, one day, My Father will honor you; He will reward you.”

And, for all of eternity, you and I will be forever glad for the day we said, “Here am I, Lord . . . bury me!”

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me.

The world behind me, the cross before me.

The world behind me, the cross before me.

No turning back, no turning back.

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