

The Gospel of John

Session 7

John 10:22—12:50

I. John 10:22-42

1. The Feast of Dedication was a relatively new feast. In 167 BC, the king of Syria (who ruled Palestine) attempted to force pagan worship on Israel. A sacrifice to Zeus was offered in the Temple. This is the “desolating sacrilege” mentioned in 1 Maccabees 1:59. Some Jews (among the priestly aristocracy) supported this effort but it led to a revolt under Judas Maccabeus who purified and rededicated the Temple in 164 BC.
2. In the Temple, Jesus is confronted by “the Jews” who demand to know if he is the messiah. Although this question has been answered by Jesus in 10:14-18 in an unambiguous way, they refuse to listen to him since they judge “according to the flesh” (8:14).
3. Jesus supplies an answer to their question in 10:25-30: As Israel celebrates God’s renewed Presence in the Temple, Jesus tells them that human beings have access to God through him (10:30). Jesus insists that his works bear witness about him (10:25) but that they do not believe because they are not part of his flock. They are unable to hear his voice and, thus, to receive eternal life (10:27-28). The Presence of God in the Temple has been perfect in Jesus and so the Feast of Dedication finds its fulfillment in him.
4. Has Jesus committed blasphemy? “The Jews” certainly think that he has since, as they see it, he is simply a human being who has made himself equal to God. But Jesus has emphasized all along (as in 8:28) that he does nothing himself but has come to fulfill the Father’s will. Jesus is the one whom the Father has “consecrated and sent into the world” (10:36). Jesus invites them to reflect upon his works (in which they seem to have a great interest) which testify to the fact that “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (10:38). The Father and the Son, while they can be distinguished, work as one.
5. In 10:40 Jesus crosses the Jordan and leaves Judea. He goes to the place where John was baptizing. John the Baptist’s witness has born fruit. On the basis of his witness and on the basis of their own encounter with Jesus the people in this area (non-Jews) come to faith (10:42).

II. John 11:1-54

1. 11:1-6 sets the stage for the action. Jesus has a close relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. 11:2 notes that Mary will anoint Jesus in 12:1-3 and 11:5 notes that Jesus “loved” Mary, Martha and Lazarus. When Jesus learns that Lazarus is ill, he delays going to him. While on the surface this seems odd, we have come to know that Jesus does things in his own time. 11:4 gives us a hint about this: Lazarus’ illness is not a chance event, but it has occurred “that the Son of God may be glorified through it”.
2. 11:7-16: The disciples are surprised that Jesus wants to return to Judea for “the Jews” were seeking to kill him (10:31). Jesus will risk death to go to Lazarus and this foreshadows what he will do on the Cross. Jesus refers to Lazarus’ death as a falling asleep (11:11) and this means that Jesus goes to “wake” him. Jesus makes it clear that Lazarus has died and that he is happy not to have prevented his death. This makes it clear that Jesus is about to offer another sign which invites belief (11:14). The suggestion here is that for the Incarnate Word raising the dead is like waking someone from sleep. Like the miracle at Cana (2:1-11), the healing of the paralyzed man (5:1-17), the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15), and

he healing of the man born blind (9:1-41), this sign will reveal the mystery of Jesus. Thomas summons his fellow disciples to die with Jesus (11:16).

3. 11:17-27: By the time Jesus reaches Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days (11:17). Jewish tradition held that the spirit of a person left the body after three days. This means that Lazarus is certifiably dead. Martha goes out to meet Jesus while Mary remains home to mourn (the period of mourning was seven days). Martha has faith in Jesus but is puzzled by his actions. Why was he not there (11:21)? Jesus refers to the resurrection of the dead in which many Jews (especially the Pharisees) believed (11:23). Jesus moves from the affirmation that the dead will be raised at the end of history to an affirmation about himself: "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:24). To have faith in Jesus is to share in his life and to share in his life is to enter into communion with God (note 10:30). Jesus asks Martha if she believes this and this results in a confession of faith: "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" (11:27). This is a true confession of faith which clearly goes well beyond traditional Jewish messianic expectations.
4. 11:28-37: Martha returns to her house to tell her sister Mary that Jesus is calling for her. Mary then goes to find Jesus who is still outside Bethany. Note that in 11:32 Mary says the same thing her sister said in 11:21. They both express faith in Jesus' power to heal. "The Jews" have accompanied Mary in her mourning and Jesus now behold both they and Mary weeping. Jesus is "deeply moved" and "greatly troubled" (11:33) by this. This will happen again in 12:27 as his "hour" approaches. Jesus is "deeply moved" at two levels. First, he is responding humanly to the death of someone he loves and the grief of those close to him. Second, he is responding to the reality of death and what it says about the human state under sin. If we think of Jesus as filled with the love of God, we can begin to imagine (but only begin to) the nature of his grief.
5. 11:38-44: Jesus now arrives at the tomb and is "deeply moved" again (11:38). The body of Lazarus has been anointed for burial and placed in a tomb. This tomb has been sealed by rolling a stone over the entrance. To tomb would have contained shelves in the wall on which corpses would have been placed. Jesus wants the tomb to be opened. While Martha has made a profession of faith in Jesus as the Resurrection, she has not yet come to a full understanding of what this means. She protests that Lazarus' corpse has begun to decompose and that opening the tomb will only release the odor. (Why increase the suffering by literally smelling death?) Jesus makes it clear that he is about to reveal the "glory of God" (11:40) which is his power to give life. The glory of God is revealed in his delivering human beings from sin and death. In 11:41-42 Jesus offers a prayer to the Father. The purpose of this prayer is to allow those listening to know that he has been sent by the Father. Jesus is not asking for the Father to raise Lazarus but to show those listening that he and the Father share a perfect communion. What is about to happen will be done by the Father and the Son acting in concert. The actions of the Son reveal and glorify the Father and the Father glorifies the Son. In 11:43 what Jesus said in 5:28-29 takes place—the dead hear his voice and come out of their tombs. It is important to notice that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead by command. This, of course, takes us back to 1:1-3. Jesus is the Word of Life. The release of Lazarus from death is signified by the removal of the burial linen (11:44). Lazarus is no longer dead. As a sign, this indicates that Jesus' resurrection will free human being from death; they will be unbound and set free.
6. 11:45-54: The response to the raising of Lazarus is, as we should expect, mixed. Some of "the Jews" who came to mourn with Mary believe. In their case, the sign conduces to faith. Note that some of them accept that Lazarus was raised from the dead but that this only hardens their opposition (11:46). The reasoning of the Council is interesting: if Jesus is allowed to continue his signs, many people will believe him and the Romans, interpreting his movement to be a messianic rebellion, may respond with force. This might even involve the destruction of the Temple. Ironically, a Jewish rebellion seeking to defend

the nation and the Temple, results in this very thing. Caiaphas, unknowingly, speaks prophetically. It is best that one man die “for the nation” (11:51). Note the interpretation of Jesus’ death in 11:51-52.

III. John 11:55-12:11

1. In 11:55-57 the stage is set for Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. Passover was a pilgrimage festival which meant that it could only be celebrated in Jerusalem. In order to celebrate the Passover, pilgrims would have to ritually purify themselves and so would arrive in Jerusalem early to wash in the various pools near the Temple. The tension in the city is made clear. The chief priests and the Pharisees are determined to arrest Jesus having already made plans to execute him (11:53).
2. 12:1-11 is a symbolic scene which anticipates Jesus’ death and takes place “six days before the Passover” (12:1). In the context of a dinner given by Martha, Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with a pound of scented oil. This anticipates the large quantity of perfumed ointment which Nicodemus brings to Jesus’ tomb in 19:39. At this dinner, Jesus is being symbolically prepared for burial. Mary then wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair, and this anticipates Jesus washing the feet of the disciples in 13:1-20. Both the preparation for burial and the washing of the disciples’ feet symbolize Jesus’ self-oblation on the Cross. The whole house is filled with the fragrance of the oil and this symbolizes the extravagance of Jesus’ act.
3. Judas Iscariot protests against this “waste” (12:5). But his protest is completely insincere for he has stolen money from the common purse (12:6). Jesus’ words in 12:8 recall Deuteronomy 15:11. There will always be an opportunity (and an obligation!) to help the poor but there will not always be an opportunity to anoint Jesus.
4. The situation now grows more tense as “the Jews” are now determined to kill not only Jesus but Lazarus as well. The stage is now set for Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem.

IV. John 12:12-19

1. As he enters Jerusalem, Jesus is given a royal, messianic welcome. Palm branches were symbols of Jewish nationalism and liberation and had their origin in the Maccabean revolt against Greek rule (1 Maccabees 13:51). He is also given the messianic greeting in 12:13 which comes from Psalm 118:25-26. Jesus is also hailed as Israel’s king. The crowd may think of Jesus as warrior-king who has come to liberate Judea from Roman rule. This is the way that “the Jews” will present Jesus to Pilate.
2. What Jesus does in 12:14 may be understood as a response to all of this. He enacts Zechariah 9:9-17 (Zechariah 9:9 is quoted in 12:15). In doing this, Jesus sends the message that he is the messiah but that he has come to usher in a reign of peace; he has not come to drive the Romans out of Judea. It becomes clear that the crowd and Jesus have very different understandings of kingship. 12:16 notes that when this happened, the disciples did not understand the significance of Jesus’ actions. Understanding only came later when they reflected on these events after the resurrection.
3. The crowd which witnessed the raising of Lazarus has followed Jesus to Jerusalem. This group has arrived at an incomplete faith even as they witness to Lazarus being raised from the dead. This popular acclaim clearly frustrates the Pharisees since it is their intention to have him arrested (11:57).

V. John 12:20-26

1. Now, some Greeks (Gentiles) enter the drama. They may be “God-fearers” or Gentiles who have an interest in Judaism but who have not yet converted. They have come to celebrate Passover.
2. It is significant that at their appearance Jesus begins to talk about his “hour” of his glorification. This is a reference to his death and resurrection. This is another indication that Jesus will create a new Israel which will include Gentiles. This has already been mentioned in 10:14-16.
3. The image of the grain of wheat shines a light on the nature of Jesus’ hour. In order for there to be wheat, grains of wheat must “die” by being put into the ground. But this “death” actually yields fruit. The same is true of Jesus’ hour. He will die but his death will bear fruit in new life.
4. The pattern of Jesus’ life and death is to be the pattern for Christians (12:25-26). Jesus’ disciples are to be characterized by loving self-sacrifice for they understand that life is kept by giving it away. Ironically, it is by giving one’s life away, expending it in the service of God, that one receives life.

VI. John 12:27-36

1. This scene resembles the synoptic accounts of Gethsemane (note Mark 14:32-42). Jesus says that his soul is “troubled” at what approaches. And yet, he says that he will not ask the Father to save him from “this hour” (12:27). The reason is that “this hour” defines his mission from the Father. This “hour” is the hour of Father’s glorification in the Son’s death for the self-offering of the Son reveals the Father’s glory which is his love.
2. Bearing witness to the Son, the Father responds: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again” (12:28). The Father has glorified his name in the Son’s ministry thus far and he will glorify it again in the Son’s death and resurrection. It is important to note that in John Jesus’ death is not a disaster that befalls him but the event in which the glory of God is revealed.
3. The voice of the Father does not provide Jesus with new information; it is for the sake of those listening (12:30). The voice confirms that the Father and the Son always work in concert for theirs is a union of perfect love.
4. In 12:30-32 Jesus returns to the theme of his being “lifted up” (note 3:14 and 8:28). This “lifting up” refers to the Cross but it has already been presented as being prefigured by Moses “lifting up” the bronze serpent in the wilderness for the healing of Israel. Through his self-offering on the Cross, Jesus will cleanse and purify humankind. Jesus’ self-oblation will be both a “judgment” (12:31) on “this world” (the world distorted by sin) in that it will result in the world being set right. Ironically, Jesus’ death will result in the destruction of sin. His self-oblation will also be a kind of exorcism in which the “ruler of the world” will be “cast out” (12:31). Both of these images suggest the completeness with which human sin will be dealt. God will be revealed in the total overthrow and removal of sin and evil.
5. In addition, Jesus’ being “lifted up” will result in people being drawn to him (both Jews and Gentiles). Jesus’ self-oblation will be the birth of the New Israel. That Jesus is talking about his crucifixion is made explicit in 12:33.
6. The Jerusalem crowd has not yet arrived at a mature faith for it is puzzled by what Jesus has said. It refers to the belief that the Messiah would restore Israel and then reign forever. A King whose throne is a cross and who triumphs by suffering death is beyond its grasp at this moment.
7. The time for coming to a mature faith is limited and, finally, the only possible choices available are either walking in “darkness” (12:35) or being “sons of light” (12:36).

VII. John 12:37-43

1. This section is a report on the consequences of Jesus' presence in Jerusalem up to this point. It sets the stage for Jesus' arrest and trial. Jesus hides himself from the crowd, indicating his distance from them.
2. Despite Jesus' signs, the crowd has not come to genuine faith (as 12:34 indicates). This should not be surprising as the citation from Isaiah 53:1 indicates (12:38). Israel has a persistent pattern of disbelief and the response to Jesus shows that this endures. 12:39 says that they "could not believe" and in support of this Isaiah 6:10 is cited. For John, faith involves both the initiative of God (6:44) and the response of a person (12:42-43). The crowd's blindness is to be understood as either willed or permitted by God, quite possibly for the sake of bringing about deliverance. The crowd's blindness is not something which God has simply imposed upon it. 12:41 is important for it says that when Isaiah had a vision of God (Isaiah 6:5) he also saw the Word who has become incarnate in Jesus. Thus, what Isaiah says may be understood to be prophetic of Jesus.
3. 12:42 notes that many of the "authorities" came so some kind of faith in Jesus but their fear of being put out of the synagogue outweighed their new faith and so they did not confess it. Of these people, John comments that "they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (12:43). This is what Jesus has accused "the Jews" of in 5:44.

VIII. John 12:44-50

1. This section may be taken as a summary of what Jesus has taught in chapters 1-12. The first affirmation (12:44-45) here is that whoever believes in the Son believes in the Father who sent him. The Son is transparent to the Father such that to believe in the Son is simultaneously to believe in the Father who is revealed in him.
2. The second affirmation (12:46) is that Jesus is the light of the world, the Light of Divine Truth shining into the darkness of sin and revealing it to be darkness. To receive this Light is to walk out of darkness and to pass from death to Life.
3. The third affirmation (12:47-48) is that those who reject Jesus reject the only means of salvation. Those who reject Life and Light have condemned themselves to death and sin. Quite simply, nothing can be done for those who have rejected Life and Light.
4. The final affirmation (12:49-50) is that Jesus has not spoken on his own authority but has spoken what the Father has given him to say. This does not mean that his authority is secondary to that of the Father's but that the Father and the Son share one authority conjointly. In other words, the Son is not anxious about his authority and it is not his mission to somehow assert it.