

Study 24: The Gospel of John – Part 3: Glory

The Book of Glory. In John 17:1 Jesus prays, "*Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you...*" This prayer is an example of why the second major section of John's Gospel is sometimes called the *Book of Glory*. As we saw earlier, the key word in the first half of the Gospel is "sign" and we saw God's glory revealed in these signs. But now God's glory will appear more completely in the passion, death and resurrection of the Son of Man.

The Glory of God. The idea of God's glory has been around a long time, and appears throughout the Old Testament history of God's people.

In the Book of Exodus God's glory is present in the freeing of His people from their slavery in Egypt, and it's made manifest in a visible way as both the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that lead the people night and day as they make their way to the freedom God wants for them [Ex 13:21-22].

We see another example when the prophet Isaiah is called by God [Is 6] and experiences a vision of God's glory filling the Temple. Isaiah comes to a realization of the greatness of God's glory, of His holiness and majesty; and it is this understanding that is the hallmark of Isaiah's subsequent preaching.

These manifestations of the glory of God, which in the Old Testament gave God's people a glimpse of the very nature of God, are surpassed with the Incarnation, when God Himself becomes flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus' entire life manifests God's glory, but it is especially evident to us in "the hour" of which Jesus speaks so frequently in John's Gospel. This "hour" is Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, an event at the very center of history that reveals the true extent of God's love for us.

In the first part of his Gospel – the *Book of Signs* -- John depicts all too graphically a drama of rejection: "He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him [Jn 1:11]. This rejection, however, is two-edged. First there is the rejection of Jesus Christ by those who had been long prepared by the Father to receive Him, by God's people; but then there is also the rejection by God of those who are "false shepherds" of His people. In the second half of his Gospel, however, in the *Book of Glory*, John focuses on the positive. He focuses on the promise Jesus offers His disciples, the blessed joy of those who receive Him.

Now open your Bible and read the *Gospel of John* chapters 13 to 21. As you read you make the following notations in the margin alongside these portions of the *Gospel of John*:

- ✠ The Farewell Discourses – Jn 13-17
- ✠ The Passion Narrative – Jn 18-19
- ✠ The Risen Jesus – Jn 20-21

The Farewell Discourses. From our study of the first half of John's Gospel, you should already have noticed that John usually presents the reader with some dramatic action of Christ and then follows it with a detailed explanation of its deeper meaning. This explanation often takes the form of a dialogue. John continues with this approach here.

But unlike the discourses we encountered in the first half of John's Gospel, these discourses are addressed to the apostles in private. They aim at providing an explanation, not only of the action which Jesus performs in their presence, but also of His act of redemption itself.

Did Jesus say all these things on this occasion as John has indicated, or did John collect various comments and teachings of Jesus and, for the sake of the dramatic effect, combine them in the form of these final discourses? As you might expect, the scholars disagree on the answer, but for us the answer is really unimportant. We need only remember that John was inspired by the Holy Spirit who gave us the final product, John's Gospel.

The Opening Scene [Jn 13:1-30]. In this passage John introduces the narrative with the dramatic scene of Jesus washing the feet of the apostles, and action that brings out the significance of the passion and resurrection. In doing so He gives His disciples a taste of the true meaning of His sacrificial act of redemption on the very eve of its accomplishment. In a sense, Jesus follows the example of the Old Testament prophets who often acted out their prophecies. In his *Letter to the Philippians* Paul wrote:

“Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross” [Phil 2:5-8].

As Paul writes this hymn of praise to Christ, it would seem that he has this very scene in mind: Jesus strips Himself of His garments and performs a rite of purification that is usually performed by a slave. And in doing so Jesus foreshadows a far greater rite of purification, the rite of purification of all sin that He will perform the next day with His passion and death. And notice, too, after He performs the rite He then puts on His garments and resumes His place at the head of the table. Pay close attention to the discourses that follow the dramatic action of this opening scene, and you will see that Jesus actually intended to convey this meaning to the apostles.

First Discourse [Jn 13:31-14:31]. In this first discourse Jesus addresses both His *departure* and His *return*. The *departure* He speaks of is really twofold: His death on the Cross and His subsequent Ascension to the Father. In the same way, His return has two elements. The first is His Resurrection after three days, while the second is His return at the end of time, what we call His second coming.

In John 14 Jesus offers the apostles the hope of eternal life with Him and the Father. He also describes Himself as “the way and the truth and the life” explaining that all come to the Father only through Him. He is then the *only* Way.

John wants us to know that future generations (that's us) will not be disadvantaged because they were born after Christ returned to the Father:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father” [Jn 14:12].

The Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, will continue Christ's work in every place and every time. Indeed, as He tells the apostles, the Church will do even greater things than He did during His earthly life. For now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, His work will not be restricted to one tiny corner of the world or a few short years, but will be carried out by His Church, spreading the Gospel throughout the entire world until the end of time.

Second Discourse [Jn 15-16]. Here we encounter Jesus' powerful statement that defines His relationship to the Church, including His own indwelling union with His apostles and the great work of the Holy Spirit among them.

In portraying this relationship Jesus applies the well-known image of the vine. All Jews were familiar with this image and knew that Israel was the Lord's vine. For example, in Psalm 80 we find the image clearly expressed:

"You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove away the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground; it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered by its shadow, the cedars of God by its branches. It sent out boughs as far as the sea, shoots as far as the river" [Ps 80: 9-12].

And Isaiah depicts an Israel that has been unfaithful to God, a vine that brings forth "wild grapes":

"My friend had a vineyard on a fertile hillside; he spaded it, cleared it of stones, and planted the choicest vines; within it he built a watchtower, and hewed out a wine press. Then he looked for the crop of grapes, but what it yielded was wild grapes. Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done? Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? Now, I will let you know what I mean to do to my vineyard: Take away its hedge, give it to grazing, break through its wall, let it be trampled! Yes, I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briers; I will command the clouds not to send rain upon it. The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his cherished plant; He looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! for justice, but hark, the outcry!" [Is 5:1-7]

The vine must, therefore, be replaced. The vine is no longer Israel, the unfaithful. Now the vine of God is Christ Himself and His Church:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned" [Jn 15:1-6].

But Jesus goes on to tell His apostles that His key message is quite simply, "love." But He also tells them how to remain in and share God's love:

"As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" [Jn 15:9-13].

Jesus goes on to describe some of the hardships they will face in carrying out God's work in the world, but He also promises that they will not be alone. He will send His greatest gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. He gives them a taste of what they can expect after that day of Pentecost:

“When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning” [Jn 15:26-27]

“But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you” [Jn 16:13-14]

Jesus finishes the discourse with a prophecy that no doubt made the apostles uneasy; for he predicts their defection at His time of greatest need. But then He tells them not to worry because He will give them the courage they need to go on to complete His work in the world:

“Behold, the hour is coming and has arrived when each of you will be scattered to his own home and you will leave me alone. But I am not alone, because the Father is with me. I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” [Jn 16:32-33].

Third Discourse [Jn 17]. This final discourse takes the form of a prayer to the Father. Jesus has already spoken of His union with His disciples, and now He shares something of the nature of His union with the Father. This prayer, in some respects the climax of John's Gospel, is often called the “*High Priestly Prayer*” because in it Jesus consecrates Himself as both High Priest and Atoning Victim for the sins of humanity.

With this prayer John concludes his unique treatment of the Last Supper. Some people are surprised by John's seeming omission of any mention of the institution of the Eucharist, something all three of the synoptic Gospels address. Some even believe that this means John was ignorant of this event or considered it unimportant. This, however, would be a serious misunderstanding of John's approach. As we have already seen and discussed, John takes a highly sacramental approach in his Gospel and makes frequent use of inference and symbolism. Indeed, a proper reading of John's Last Supper account is to understand his narration as occurring against a backdrop of the institution of the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood. It is this Sacrament that fulfills Christ's promise of His abiding presence in His Church, and the means by which His disciples abide with Him. The Eucharist is, in fact, the very sap of the vine that nourishes and sustains us, the branches. Remember, too, that John wrote His Gospel after all the others. There was no need to provide one more literal description of the institution of the Eucharist, something that had been done by Matthew, Mark and Luke. John was more interested in providing the Church with a theology of the Eucharist which he introduces in Chapter Six and completes in Jesus' Last Supper discourses.

The Passion Narrative [Jn 18-19]. This is the one section of John's Gospel that more closely parallels the three synoptic Gospels. This is to be expected since John was a witness to the whole

of the passion and death of Jesus and had likely shared his recollection of these events with the other disciples. But John does take a somewhat different approach in that he concentrates on the total obedience of Jesus during His passion; and it is this obedience that that is the substance of Christ's glory. We see this prefigured earlier in John's Gospel when Jesus says:

"My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work" [Jn 4:34].

"I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do" [Jn 17:4]

And from Calvary, Jesus' last words – *"It is finished."* – bring this theme to its conclusion.

The narrative itself provides some excellent insights into the thoughts of the apostles, the Jewish leaders, and Pontius Pilate. We encounter a fearful Peter who denies his Lord three times in a matter of minutes, something witnessed by John who had accompanied him to the courtyard of the chief priest. We meet the pagan Pilate, a man caught up in the relativism of his day – *"What is truth?"* – who unknowingly engages in two remarkable dialogs with his creator. Ultimately, although Pilate can "find no guilt in Him", he succumbs to fear and the pragmatism of his world and condemns Jesus to death. And we witness the beautiful scene in which the dying Jesus presents His Mother to John and to the world.

John's passion narrative, although it parallels that of the other Gospels, contains descriptions of some very personal experiences which John takes pains to remind us are true. As he tells the world, *"An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may (come to) believe"* [Jn 19:35].

The Risen Jesus [Jn 20-21]. These final two chapters of John's Gospel not only tell the story of the Resurrection of Jesus and the personal experiences of Peter, John and Mary Magdalene, but they continue with descriptions of several of the appearances of the risen Jesus among His disciples. John makes a point of telling us that he has selected and described only some of the events that occurred after the Resurrection, enough that we may come to believe:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name" [Jn 20:30-31].

John also reminds us that Christ's glorification by the Father was understood by the disciples only after the Resurrection: *"For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead"* [Jn 20:9]. And so we witness Thomas' doubt and his subsequent profession of faith: *"My Lord and my God!"* [Jn 21:28] And then we hear Jesus' blessing on those who will come after and believe without seeing as Thomas and the others had.

In the final chapter we are with the apostles in Galilee where they meet the risen Jesus on the shore of Sea of Tiberius. It is the most human encounter with the risen Lord who cooks breakfast for them over a charcoal fire. And within this encounter Jesus singles out and forgives the repentant Peter, instructing him to "feed my sheep", once again reinforcing the primacy of Peter among the apostles.

Unity of the Two Testaments. John begins his recounting of the final days of Jesus with the statement, *"Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father"* [Jn 13:1]. That the passion takes place at the Passover was truly significant for anyone familiar with this great feast of the Jewish people. The connection between the first Passover which took place on the eve of the Israelites exodus from the captivity in Egypt and this

second Passover in which all of humanity are delivered from their slavery to sin was not lost on John. Throughout the passion narrative John highlights the parallels. For example, he describes how the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs, as was usual in crucifixions, in fulfillment of the words of Scripture:

"You shall not break any of its bones" [Ex 12:46] – speaking of the Passover lamb.

"But he shall keep it in the second month, during the evening twilight of the fourteenth day of that month, eating it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and not leaving any of it over till morning, nor breaking any of its bones, but observing all the rules of the Passover" [Num 9:12] – again, addressing the Passover meal.

"Many dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me. So wasted are my hands and feet that I can count all my bones. They stare at me and gloat; they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots" [Ps 22:17-19]

"God watches over all their bones; not a one shall be broken" [Ps 34:20].

Here John is telling us that Christ is the true paschal lamb whose blood saves the People of God from the Prince of this World who held humanity in slavery until the coming of the Redeemer.

Liturgy and Life. St. Augustine remarks that the 40 days of Lent are a figure of our life on earth, while the dawning of Easter and the 50 days that follow represent a foretaste of the eternal joy God has destined for those who love Him. It is not coincidence that John's Gospel is used so heavily in the liturgy during both the Lenten and Easter seasons.

Reading the Farewell Discourses one comes to understand better the important role played by the Holy Spirit in both the foundation of the Church and in the ongoing saving work of Christ in all generations that have followed. Perhaps we sometimes fail to consider the important role played by the Holy Spirit in our own journey to salvation, in our own fidelity to Christ and His commandments.

Study Questions:

1. In Jn 15:19 how are the disciples in the world but not of the world? And what does the "world" mean anyway? Does it mean the same here as it does in Jn 3:16? How should a Christian respond to persecution and suffering?
2. In Jn 17:20, for whom is Jesus praying? How effective is this prayer and how long lasting?
3. What authority does Pilate have over Jesus, and what authority does he lack? What about the culpability of the Jewish leaders? Is it real guilt even though God's sovereign plan was being carried out? [See Jn 18-19]
4. In Jn 20:9 what was it the disciples first failed to understand? How do you think this relates to Mt 28:17?
5. What does Jesus mean by "*Feed my lambs*", "*Tend my sheep*", and "*Feed my sheep*" in Jn 21:15-17? How does this relate to 1 Pet 5:1-4?