

“Where I am, my servant also will be.”

By Dr. J. Smith

A couple of months ago, in our family devotions, we read John 12. Verse 26 struck me as particularly appropriate for ministers and ministers-to-be. Jesus said, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.” Very touching words, especially that middle part: “where I am, my servant also will be.” But what do they mean exactly? Taken by themselves, these words could be taken to mean many different things. To understand what Jesus meant, we need to look at the occasion and the context.

Our Saviour spoke these words during the last week of his earthly ministry, shortly after the triumphal entry. Many people had come to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, and the Lord Jesus was the main attraction. Many people went out to meet him, so much so that in verse 19 the Pharisees threw up their hands and said, “The whole world has gone after him!” It was in this context that some Greeks wanted to see him as well. The word “Greeks” does not necessarily mean that they came from Greece, but rather that they participated in Greek culture and spoke the language as their native tongue. The New Testament contrasts Jews and Greeks, which implies that these people were uncircumcised Gentiles rather than Greek speaking Jews (see, e.g., John 7:35). Yet they joined those who were going up to Jerusalem for the Passover, so they must have been God-fearing folk. People such as they were allowed in the court of the Gentiles, fulfilling Isaiah 56:7, which says that the temple would be “a house of prayer for all nations.”

These Greek visitors made their approach rather carefully; they didn’t go straight to Jesus, but they approached the disciple with the Greek name, Philip, and they addressed him humbly and respectfully: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” Why? What did they want to see Jesus about? We can guess, but John doesn’t say. In fact we never even find out whether they actually met Jesus or not. Evidently what’s more important is Jesus’s response to their request.

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

John 12:26

Philip went and told Andrew, and Andrew went with Philip and together they told Jesus. It makes you wonder: why did they not simply bring the Greeks along to Jesus? It’s possible that Jesus was in a part of the temple that the Greeks did not have access to, but that doesn’t explain why Philip had to check with Andrew first. It seems that the disciples were a bit unsure what to do with this request; they did not assume that Jesus would see these Greeks, and that’s understandable. Remember that in the past Jesus had said to the Canaanite woman that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 15), and when he sent out his disciples in Matthew 10, he only permitted them to go to the Jews, not to the Gentiles. So it was not to be taken for granted that he would be willing to speak with these Greeks. Hence Philip first

consulted with Andrew, and together they went to Jesus.

Jesus then gave a rather curious response: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." Now, how exactly is his answer connected with the request? Was Jesus turning it down? Was he saying, "This is not the time for me to be visiting with Greeks. It's time for the Son of Man to be glorified!" It could be translated that way: the Greek sentence begins with the particle *de*, which can introduce a contrast: "*But* Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.'" Yet I do not think that this is the right interpretation. I do not see Jesus's response as a negative one, but as a positive one. The fact that even non-Jews now want to meet with Jesus shows that it is high time for Jesus to be glorified, so that the gospel can go to them. The fact that Greeks have come to the Passover but want to see *Jesus* there shows that it is high time for the Passover to be fulfilled. It's time for a greater deliverance than the Exodus of the Jews. It's time for the salvation of the world. Jesus tells his disciples what this request means: the Gentile world is waiting to hear about Jesus. Well, if that's the case, then he needs to be glorified.

It seems to me that when Jesus used the word "glorify" here, he was not speaking in the first instance of the glorification that would follow his ascension but about something more immediate than that, namely his crucifixion. Look at verses 27–28: Jesus is glorified in fulfilling the purpose for which God sent him. His meaning becomes even clearer in verses 31–33: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show the kind of *death* he was going to die." It was in the crucifixion that Satan's hold over the Gentiles

would be broken so that all people could come to Jesus. In verse 32 Jesus alluded to the words that he had spoken earlier to Nicodemus in John 3:14–15: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of man will be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Already there Jesus had said that salvation was not just for the Jews but for everyone who would believe in him, and now in John 12 Jesus says that the time to make this happen has come.

In short, the important issue in this passage is not whether the Greeks actually met with Jesus or what they said to him if they did, but it is that their request confirms that it was time for Jesus to be crucified so that the Gentiles might be gathered in. He is more important to the Greeks dead than alive. As long as he is alive they cannot find their life in him. Verse 24 confirms this interpretation. There Jesus spoke of the need for his death by using the illustration of a seed: "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed; but if it dies it bears much fruit." That's a literal translation, but wheat, of course, is not a fruit-bearing plant in the sense that we use the word fruit today. The meaning is that it is through decomposing in the ground that a wheat kernel is most productive or fruitful, because when it is sown in the ground it can bear many more seeds like itself. It is through Christ's death that many others will come to life.

But the path to life in Christ is a path that also leads through suffering and death. Those who come to faith in Jesus do not travel a *different* road than the one he traveled, but they travel the road that he traveled first. A disciple of Jesus must be prepared to die. Verse 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. If anyone

would serve me,” said Jesus, “then let him follow me.” It’s as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Or as the apostle Paul put it in Philippians 3: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

That then brings us back to verse 26. What did Jesus mean when he said, “Where I am my servant also where will be?” In context you could take it to mean, “Where I am now, about to lose my life, my servant will be there too.” Or you could take it to mean, “Where I am heading, heavenly glory, my servant will end up there too.” Verse 25 suggests that both meanings apply.

Keep in mind that Jesus here is still speaking directly to his disciples, Philip and Andrew. They had just received a request from some Greeks who wanted to see Jesus. Would Jesus see them? Jesus tells Philip and Andrew four things.

1. He must die so that those Greeks, and Gentiles the world over, can be drawn to him. Those Greeks represent the waiting mission fields of the Gentile world. They represent us, strangers to the covenant, to whom the gospel has now come.
2. It is not enough for those Greeks simply to come and *see* Jesus. No, they must *follow* him to the point of loving him more than their own lives. That too remains true for us.
3. Jesus teaches Philip and Andrew what they are to do with people who want to see Jesus: they are to make disciples of them, disciples like themselves, disciples of all nations, and those disciples must in turn make still others, all of whom must count the cost of discipleship: those who want to serve Jesus must follow him.
4. Those who follow Jesus can expect a road of suffering and death. Servants of Jesus should not expect to be treated better than their Master was. Yet as they travel that road they have the sure promise that Jesus is always with them and will never leave them alone. And at the end of the road they can expect that the Father will honour them too, just as he honoured his own Son.



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