

## The Upside Down Guide to Life:

### *Seeking the Seekers*

**John 12:20-36**

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006 (the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent)**

Author Os Guinness tells the story of giving a speech at an elegant dinner in San Francisco. Many of the dinner guests were eminent names in the world of high finance and cutting-edge technology. After Guinness' speech a middle-aged man approached him and said, "I'm at a point in my life where I realize there has to be something more. Like many of my friends around here, I've learned a lesson I wish I had known when I started out: Having it all just isn't enough. Business school never told me how to assess the deeper things of life."<sup>1</sup>

Guinness contends that this man – like so many people in our world today – is a “seeker.” According to Guinness, a seeker is “someone for whom life, or a part of life has become a point of wonder, a question, a problem, and irritation. It happens so intensely, so persistently, that a sense of need consumes them and launches them on a quest.” In a sense, doesn't this describe all of us? You may recall the popular U2 song that cries out “I still haven't found what I'm looking for.” Why did this song resonate with millions of people around the world? We're seeking something: fulfillment, satisfaction, peace, God or maybe, as our church mission says, we're seeking to know Christ and make him known.

The term seeker is in vogue these days but it's actually an ancient concept. In verse 20 of this passage we meet a group of seekers. Read verse 20. Who were these Greeks? They weren't necessarily from Greece nor did they own the local diner; they were non-Jews, people outside the circle of faith, who were sincerely seeking the Living God of Israel. The previous story (in verses 12-19) is called the Triumphal Entry in which Jesus enters Jerusalem during the Passover Feast. The masses of people were ecstatic about Jesus, but the religious leaders had a much different reaction: “Look how the whole world is going after him,” they sneered in disgust. These Greeks had probably watched Jesus and now they were curious: Who is Jesus? What can he do for us?

So in verse 21 they come to Phillip (who has a Greek name, by the way) and ask him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” In the Gospel of John the phrase “come and see” is almost a motto for following Jesus. So then in verse 22 Phillip tells Andrew and Andrew goes to tell Jesus and then in verse 23 Jesus responds to their request. But it's a very strange response. As far as we know, Jesus never even talks to these Greeks. And his response doesn't sound very appealing. He talks about kernels of wheat falling in the ground and dying and hating your life and being lifted up on a cross. If this is the first time you've heard this Bible passage – or the one hundredth time you've heard it – it should shock you, perhaps even grate on you. Hey, it's alright to search for God, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind! In this passage Jesus will address seekers – which is all

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<sup>1</sup> Os Guinness, **Long Journey Home**, page 1.

of us – by talking about three things: dying to self, embracing suffering and making a decision.

**First, he addresses seekers from all walks of life by inviting us to die to self.** All throughout this passage Jesus refers to his death. He put it this way: the Son of Man (that's a royal and magnificent title for Jesus found in the Old Testament book of Daniel) must be lifted up – and he uses the word *must*. Everyone knew what a cross meant: it was the ultimate sign of defeat, degradation and utter failure. If you believe in the Devil, then you'd have to look at the cross and say, "Jesus is the loser here, not Satan." But the strange thing is that Jesus predicted his death, he controlled the timing of his death and he even controlled the outcome of his death. The cross would be an instrument of his ultimate victory, not defeat. And through the cross Jesus would draw all people to himself.

That's the point Jesus makes in verse 24. "I tell you the truth," he begins – and anyone you hear that phrase in the Gospel of John it's as if Jesus is saying, "Hey, are you listening? Don't miss this one. This is far too important." Then Jesus went on to compare his life to a grain of wheat (read the rest of verse 24). Now let's imagine that grain of wheat could remain where it is – upright, warm, shining like gold in the sunshine of life. It's safe, cozy and comfortable; but it will never give life. It's sterile and dead. But if that seed let's go of its life and plunges into the dirt below, if it humbles itself, entering the earth and dying, it will "produce many seeds" Jesus said. It explodes with life. Jesus is defining his mission: he came to be the seed that dies and then gives life. This theme runs throughout this Gospel story (see John 10:11, 14, 17-18 and 15:13).

And then Jesus tells us that this applies to all those who want to follow him as well. Read verses 25-26. If you hear a "gospel" preached on television – or from this pulpit, for that matter – without telling you that something in you must die on a daily basis in order to follow Jesus, then you haven't heard the real Gospel. "Hating your life" did not mean that you have to kick your self with shame and self-hatred and unhappiness. It was a Hebrew way of saying the same thing Jesus said in verse 24 – dying to self. In other words, if I want to be like that kernel of wheat, hanging on, trying hard to protect my life and protect my comfort, making my life controlled and predictable, trying to have everything just the way I like it; I will never find true joy and I will never give life to the world around me. Hate your life, that is, hate your self-protecting, self-centered, self-consumed life that keeps making you miserable and unfruitful to others around you. Let that life die.

How do you die to your self? If it really is the way to find life and give life away, then we better wrestle with this question. The Bible says that when you come to Christ there is a big dying and lots of little "dyings." When you come to Christ the Bible puts it this way: "You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). That's the big death. Your whole life is now reoriented in a new direction. You receive a new nature, a new purpose, a new passion, a new community, a new kingdom and new direction in life. Your old, self-pleasing, self-protecting, self-seeking self is gone.

Okay, but if that's true, then why does my old self keep raising its ugly head? You may say, "I see it all the time in my life: anger, rage even, abusive language, lust, arrogance, impatience, apathy towards people who are suffering, lying, sassing off to my parents, cliquishness, trying to please and impress people." Our problem is that we need to apply our big death every day with an unending series of little deaths. The Apostle Paul said, "I die daily." So every day for the rest of my life I will have to ask my self questions like this: "What in my life has to die so I can love God and other people with my whole heart?" Again, it's like that grain of what saying, "There has to be more to life than just sitting in the sunshine, having my way, protecting my comfort and my sinful habits. There has to be more than this." And Jesus says to us, "There is so much more! But the only way to find it is to give your life away. Be the seed that goes into the ground and dies."

This isn't a work that you do to get right with God; this is a work that God does inside you as you enter into a relationship with Jesus and then walk with him every day. I can't force myself to die daily, but I can walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. I can invite Jesus to join me at the beginning of the day; I can return to him when I slip away; I can review the day with him when it's time for sleep. I'm constantly asking, "Lord, where did my old self raise its ugly head today? Where do I need to die? Where was I just living for myself and my own comfort and protection?" Believe me, God will show you, but he won't do it all at once – I'd die from the shock of it all!

And then notice the promise from Jesus here: he wants to give us life (see John 10:10). You get your life back – renewed, restored and deepened – and you get to bring life to others around you. Isn't that what you want? Jesus said that you can have that, but you have to die. If you try to arrange your life so it's comfortable and safe, if you try to avoid conflict and risk and change, if you want your life nice and safe and warm, you'll really have no life at all. It may be comfortable, but as far as God is concerned, it's empty and fruitless. Did you know that when they opened the tombs of the ancient Pharaoh's they found grains of wheat from 3,000 years ago that were still the same? They hadn't changed in three millenniums. What kind of life is that? So Jesus tells every seeker, "Join me, follow me, trust in me, and I will make your life a great adventure. By trusting in my death for you, the death that I died in your place to draw you to God the Father, you finally have a chance to die to your self so you can bring my life to others."

**Secondly, Jesus talks about embracing suffering.** Some of the harshest critics of Christianity claim that it focuses too much on suffering. Sigmund Freud, for instance, often blamed Christian spirituality for a certain neurotic tendency in the Western soul. At times these critics have a valid point, but it's terribly naïve to think that Christianity alone makes people miserable and anxious. As someone has said, "No philosophy of life ... and no spirituality can pretend to be mature without grappling with the timeless, haunting questions of suffering and death. These are the realities that gnaw at the human heart." So the Gospels don't apologize for dealing head-on with suffering. Even Jesus, the eternal Son of God, knows what it means to suffer.

This whole passage deals with suffering. It's filled with intense passion. But notice especially verse 27. The word Jesus used for troubled literally means shocked, agitated, and even revolted. This isn't an act; this is real suffering, anguish, and trouble. Jesus' heart is breaking. This verse is in complete contrast to Socrates who faced death while having a nice chat with his buddies. I'll take Jesus any day: he honors suffering by fully entering our pain. In Jesus our suffering matters because we matter to God the Father. There are no question marks in the biblical Greek; it's added by a translator – and personally, I think it's wrong. This wasn't a question; it's a cry of anguish shot from Jesus' heart to the heart of his heavenly Father. Jesus didn't come to spiritualize or clean up our suffering. When my wife got cancer, our friend Jay, a crusty guy who used to own the vacuum repair shop in town, looked me in the eye and then he exploded with anger and said, "Cancer, that \*\*\*\*\* disease killed my father. I hate that \*\*\*\*\* disease." On one level, that's a very Christian statement. I love that about my friend Jay. He can say stuff that's more "Christian" than some of my sweetest sermons. Suffering hurts. We are listening to real blood, guts and agony.

And yet at the same time, Jesus can turn and say, "It was for this very reason that I came to this world. Father, glorify your name." In other words, "Yes, I'm troubled. Yes, it hurts. No, I'd rather not die on a cross. But, no, I won't try to arrange my life so I can avoid suffering and trouble. I have to walk through it. And even as I walk through it, I have one prayer: Father, glorify your name – even in the midst of my suffering." Now, how can that be? How can God be glorified in the midst of suffering? How does the beauty, the awesome glory and power of the Living God shine through our life in the midst of suffering?

Part of the key to this question (and it's only part of the key) is found in what is called the sovereignty of God. The sovereignty of God means that God knows what he's doing and he's good to us – at the same time even in the midst of suffering. Here's how it works in this passage: all throughout this Gospel reading there is a strange paradox at work. On the one hand, everyone knew that dying on a cross was an awful way to end your life. As one New Testament scholar (N.T. Wright) put it, "Crucifixion was a powerful symbol in the Roman world. It said, loud and clear, "We're in charge here; you are our property; we can do with you what we like." And yet, in this passage Jesus is saying the exact opposite: I'm in charge here. I'm still drawing people to my Father (verse 32). The hour is still being fulfilled (Notice verse 23). In other words, God's timetable is still in operation. The prince of this world is being driven out (see verse 31). So even in the midst of suffering Jesus can pray, "Father, glorify your name!"

Let me tell you how I'm discovering the truth of this passage. Recently someone asked me, "So how have you changed since you moved to New York?" There is one thing that comes to mind: God is teaching me to trust that he is for me and he is able to work for good in my life. When we moved here I had no idea that my wife would get cancer and then have a near-fatal bike accident. I had no idea that God would place me on the steepest, most unrelenting learning curve I've ever been on in my life – and most of my learning comes through mistakes. I had no idea what my kids would have to go through. At some points I said, "God, what are you doing?" But if God can die on a cross and still

be sovereign and still work it for good and still bring life to the world, then surely God can be sovereign in my life as well. God is still in charge and God will not allow anything to happen without also bringing fruit for His glory and for my good. “But if it dies it produces fruit,” Jesus said.

**Third, Jesus meets a group of seekers and talks to them about making a decision.** In other words, he’s going to say, “You can’t just keep seeking forever. At some point on your journey, you have to put a stake in the ground and make a decision.” To understand this we have to look at verse 32. The word “draw” was used elsewhere in the New Testament for hauling nets full of fish or for dragging people to court. It has the idea of forcefulness as in, “You’re going with us, buddy, whether you like it or not.” This seems a little rude of Jesus. I thought he was nice and now here he is hauling me and dragging me like I’m some guy on America’s Most Wanted. But according to the Bible we never come to God on our own. There’s always resistance from our end. When it comes to God, we’re all the prodigal sons and daughters. So what does God do with prodigals and rebels and fugitives? He goes after them and he draws them back.

I’ve talked to so many of you here today who tell me the same story, “I don’t know what’s going on for sure, I don’t even know why I’m here sometimes; I just sense that something is drawing me.” Why are you here today? Why did you accept Christ? Because God drew you and God is still drawing you. Remember John 3:16.

But we have to respond to God’s drawing upon our lives. That’s the point of verses 35-36. Jesus spoke with urgency here. The light won’t always be available. A few weeks ago I mentioned the Yogi Berra quote “If you find a fork in the road, take it.” Well, Jesus will say, “If you find a fork in the road, you can’t have it both ways. You have to decide. At the very least, when you find light – even a little bit of light – you have to act on it.”

Has God been shining some light on your path? Light doesn’t last forever. If God has given you light, walk in it. If God gives you a gift, accept it and then give it away. If God opens a door, walk through it.

You see, this passage – which talks about dying to self and walking through suffering – is really about grabbing life. That’s the promise Jesus gives in John 10:10. Why not receive all that God has to offer you? Why do we settle for less than God’s best? Why not abolish petty living? Why not shoot for the best – God’s offer of life? Why not pour out my life so others can live? I’d be a fool to settle for anything less.