

Mission Impossible?

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- [0 : 0 0] Tonight, I'd like to look with you at the passage that we have in John chapter 12. And this call of Jesus to lift him up, and when he is lifted up, that he will draw all nations to himself. Now, when looking at this passage in this moment in Jesus' life, it kind of reminded me in a strange way of just how difficult his mission was.
- The words of the title of the set of movies of Mission Impossible. And you could ask that here tonight. Was this mission impossible?
- And is it still a mission impossible for the church? The question mark over that. Because here is Jesus. He's just gone through the Hosanna moment of entering Jerusalem like a king, standing amongst the people, multitudes around him.
- And they're declaring him Hosanna, coming in the name of the king. And he's also following the Lazarus moment when he's been raised from the dead.
- [1 : 1 2] He's even gone back to that family home. Multitudes have come to see all about that. And now some Greeks come. Maybe from the northern part, around the Galilee area.
- Come down for the festival, maybe further afield. But the point is that they were the outsiders. They may have been people who were very interested in God, in the Jewish faith, but hadn't converted fully to the faith of Israel.
- But here they are. And they want to meet Jesus. And it's the very fact that they ask to meet him seems to trigger something in Jesus' mind of just the sheer scale of the mission before him.
- Sometimes in life, when God asks us to do big things, it can be quite overwhelming. And it's fascinating to notice it's the same here for Jesus. But in this passage, I think we'll see just no matter how impossible mission might seem to be for us at times.
- It's not. But what we will see in Jesus' words here is that there is a cost. And he talks about the seed that has to fall into the ground.
- [2 : 3 1] So there's a cost. But there's a confirmation as well. And you'll see that in the voice of the Father from heaven who speaks to the multitude in that moment.
- And then there's a conviction that comes when Jesus is very clear that if we lift him up, he will draw all people to himself.
- So let's look, first of all, at the cost to mission and to what we are sometimes called by God to know and experience.
- The request from the Jews to meet Jesus. You think it was just another highlight. You've raised John the Baptist. You've entered into Jerusalem with Hosanna and now everybody wants to meet you.
- If you can always compare it to somebody who's composed in an opera in their hometown and performed in their city. And now the world is asking for it to be played across the world everywhere.
- [3 : 4 2] And Jesus knew that's ultimately what was behind this request. And so his reaction, you might think, would be great, fantastic. My mission is being fulfilled.

The word is getting out there. But actually, when you read this passage, it brings a sense of turmoil to Jesus himself. He says in verse 27, now my soul is troubled.

Why? Because as these Greeks come, Jesus is provoked to think, ah, my hour has come. And what did he mean by his hour?

Only one thing. He knew that the final act in the drama was coming close. The curtains were about to fall. He was about to die.

And not just die any death, but an absolutely awful death. Worse than just physical. But for the only moment in his everlasting experience, he was not going to be aware of God the Father shining upon him.

[4 : 52] And for Jesus, that truly was hell. So all of that is in his mind because he knows that the only way that the nations, the Greeks, the others, would come to know God through the gospel would be if the gospel came to that head when he would die on a cross for the sins of the world.

So he is so aware of this being about to break upon him that even Jesus says, my heart is troubled.

God is asking him to do something that is huge. And that troubles him to the very core of his being. And that's not something that is unrelated to ourselves.

As we'll see, his mission here, he transfers it to be our mission. And sometimes when God asks you to do something, it's anything but comfortable.

It's anything that is easy. And as he asks you to do things, you may find it very difficult. And it might even trouble your hearts, as he puts it here.

[6 : 10] But how do you deal with that? How did Jesus deal with that? If you have a bad back, you can take some paracetamol. You can do something to soldier on and get on with things.

Here in Florida, we're going through the wonders of allergy season. And I had hay fever for years in Scotland, but it was nothing like here. You'd never see Poland in Scotland.

But here, it's so thick and so heavy. It's like yellow snow lying in the street. And it's everywhere. So our heads have been exploding recently.

What have we done? We take some medicine and we soldier on. We just get on through it. So for Jesus now, as the hour approaches, as it hits him how close that hour is, that he is to glorify the Father.

How does he fight through that? How does he push through his troubled heart? Well, he does so by focusing upon his Father, God.

[7 : 16] Verse 28, he says, Father, glorify your name. A prayer that Jesus would often make.

He talks of it in John chapter 17. Again, glorify me with the glory that I have known with you from before the creation of the world. I want you to tie down what that glory means in a way that might help us to connect to it.

The glory of the Father was that, we call it effulgence, that outflowing, that overflowing. If you have a cup and you pour it with water until it overflows.

That's what God's glory was, that overflowing of his being, of his character. Jesus was keeping his eye on that. He was looking at the richness and the fulfilling nature, the satisfying nature of the God.

Remember, he had always known from all of eternity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And it's that overflowing nature of God. That's his glory of what God will give of life, the life that's within himself, and he will pour it out towards others.

[8 : 33] Jesus had always known that. And now he focuses upon that. He, like a small child that's scared of us, you snuggle into the blankets of your parent. He wants to focus back on that glory that he'd always known in eternity.

And that's what he's doing here. And he says, I will only serve that glory. And if that involves pain, if that involves the hour, if that involves the cross, if that involves hell itself, that's what it will be.

The question for us is, do we have such a fix upon the glory of the Father that it outweighs anything that we might have to pay with regard to mission?

The Apostle Paul makes the same thought and connection in 2 Corinthians 4.16, where he says our light affliction is going to be far outweighed by the weight of glory that's coming our way.

So Jesus could think of the past glory and the future glory. For us, we're thinking of the future glory and focusing upon that. And that's helpful because whatever God calls us to do something, it comes at a cost.

[9 : 50] If we're going to make strides in his kingdom, if you're going to make strides in God's kingdom in Aberdeen to reach out, to lift Jesus Christ up high, there's a cost. There's a cost for every church in a sense.

When it does see God working amongst it, you'll see changes. Even to see the people coming into church when you reopen, people start coming to church. Every new face in a congregation will change a congregation.

And rightly so. Changes the dynamic, a new set of relationships, all of that. So that can be a cost for the familiar, a cost for those who've been there longer, a cost that involves changes that they don't know where to fit in the same way.

Often you'll see churches and Christians struggling to pay that cost of mission. But keep your eye on the glory of the Father, that it brings glory to the Father when his overflowing love and life is reflected back to him in redeemed humanity.

When the nations are gathered in to God's kingdom. So keep that clear in your heart and your mind when you sense that there is a cost.

[11 : 13] Because Jesus is saying here that when we follow him, we are going to find that there's a price tag in many different ways.

And that's why he says for himself, he's talking himself on a parable there in verse 24. Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.

He says, okay, the nations are coming, the Greeks are coming, they want to know who I am, but that ain't going to happen until I go to Calvary, until I drop into the ground, until I go into a tomb and die.

And then he also reflects that broader for all who would follow him and says, similar story, boys. This is what's going to happen. And verse 25, anyone, anyone who loves their life will lose it.

And while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.

[12 : 15] And where I am, my servant also will be. We'll never have to go to a cross. But we will have to lead a cruciform shape life.

It will cost us to follow Jesus. It'll cost you in different ways. We've mentioned some. When the kingdom expands and even that can lead to changes that can be costly.

But in your own heart, in order for you to put death to self, in order to live, as he puts it in verse 24, 25, think tonight in the quietness of your own home.

What is there that's in your heart, in your life, that for you to be instrumental in God's hand, for God to really use you, you have to, to a much greater degree, die to that thing.

Is there impurity in your life? And the Holy Spirit is saying to you right now, come with me, die, suffocate that, kill it.

[13 : 26] I can't use you. You can't keep in step with me if you permit that thing in your life to go. Could it be a spirit of greed?

Could it be a spirit of materialism that you're really setting the agenda of your life by the agenda of your friends, your colleagues, people who are high flyers at work, what they do, how they spend their time, what they invest themselves into?

And has that become the thing that defines your life rather than the call of Jesus to bring glory to his father and your father? And how is the kingdom going to advance?

Through you as part of the kingdom. Maybe God is calling you to look at something in your life tonight. Maybe it's something as simple as there are comfort zones that he's calling you to come out of in order that he might use you, that he might do things with you.

Now, I don't know who you are, but God does, and he's speaking to you now. But the spirit search your heart. And yes, it may be painful, but come and use the same painkiller that Jesus did.

[14 : 46] Focus upon the glory of the father, that love that the father has. He's always had for Jesus, and now Jesus has brought you into that relationship.

That you might taste more and more of that same love that he, Jesus, has always known. So don't be afraid.

I mean, Christ was troubled at this moment, but don't be afraid to pay the cost. It's ultimately worth it.

You'll be paying it with Jesus. And he's going to take you along the road sometimes and ask you to do some hard things for him. And experience some hard knocks in life, because he uses those very means to deepen his work in your life.

But that's the moment to remember he's not asking you to do anything that he hasn't done himself. He's walked that path. So he can talk the talk, because he's walked the walk.

[15 : 51] So walk with him, wherever that path may lead in the future. Ministry and service of our God and our King has cost.

We're the seed that must also fall into the ground and die to self to live for God. If we don't do that, his kingdom will not advance the way it otherwise could.

Now, because all that's quite hard, it's great to have confirmation. And that's what you have in verse 29. And one of the, not unique, but almost unique, one of three episodes in the life of Jesus, where the Father, his Father and our Father, speaks very directly into Jesus' earthly life.

And he says there in verse 28, after Jesus prayed, there's a response. So the son has spoken, now the father responds. And we hear there, the voice came from heaven.

I have glorified it. He has glorified his name. I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.

[16 : 59] And the crowd that was there, they heard it, and some said it had thundered. Others said an angel had spoken. But Jesus said what had actually happened, that it was for their sake that that voice spoke.

So what have we got happening here? Notice, this is the very voice of God heard in proximity to Jesus Christ.

Many people would love to hear from God. Does God exist? Is he there? Why doesn't he speak to me? You've prayed. You've had nothing but silence. You've really wondered. But here is not the echo of God's voice that Jesus heard.

It was the very voice of God. And it's when we're close and in proximity to Jesus of Nazareth that you will hear God in your life in ways that you've never heard him before.

So here's a great truth. With Jesus, there comes to men not some distant whisper of the voice of God, not some faint echo from the heavenly places, but the unmistakable accents of God's direct voice.

[18 : 14] End quote. That's what you have in that moment. It was a key moment, remember, in the life of Jesus because the hour was approaching.

And so he hears it, but he says there, it wasn't for my sake. It was for all of you that were listening. Listen, I'm sure it meant a lot to Jesus to hear the father say, I will glorify my name.

But it was actually for the followers, the disciples. John's recorded it so that his audience who first read his book could go, ah, now we fully understand.

This all had to be. Jesus had to be the seed that would fall into the ground. He had to die. There would have to be a cross before the glory.

And that's a pattern that's going to continue until Jesus Christ returns to this earth. And so it was a way of saying, I had to go all the way to the cross.

[19 : 29] That's what it meant for the crowd. They could look back and remember he had to do what he had to do. If he was to stop then with a surge of popularity, with the Greeks coming to seek him and not go and die on the cross, it would not have happened.

The show would have stopped. It would have meant the drama or the opera and the chief actor walking off before the final act of the play.

And this would have been the son of the composer of the drama walking off the stage. Now he stayed. And he's saying to us through this, you need to hear a voice sometimes in life to hear very clearly that God is speaking to you.

So it's a gift for us. But when we follow Christ's footsteps of dying to self in order to live for God, in order to die to self so that others might hear the gospel better through our life and through our lips, then because it's such a painful process, that it's good to know that we're doing the right thing.

Do you? Do you look at situations in your life? Maybe you're in a marriage where you're the only one who is a Christian.

[21 : 03] That's hard. And you're asking questions sometimes. Am I doing the right thing? Or when your faith is not shared in your workplace, do you stay?

Do you go? How do you respond to a grown-up child who no longer shows any interest in things of God?

How do you love them? There's lots of areas where the mission involves us suffering and dying to self in some kind of way. What you need is moments when you hear God speak to you clearly through his word.

That it's worth it. That it's worth it. They say, my son, my daughter, keep going. This is the path. This is the way. Walk in it. This is the way.

And so that's really what was happening for Jesus too. But he said, this is a voice from heaven for everybody, for everybody else.

[22 : 10] And so it encourages us when we hear God speak to us, doesn't it? You need to hear him tonight through this word.

If you come away from this message tonight, fortified, strengthened, realizing like this was just for me. That's how the spirit of God works. He'll speak in his word.

He speaks in spirit. He speaks in his providence. He speaks through his people. Well, the question for us is to listen. That crowd, some thought it thundered. Others thought it was an angel.

Only Jesus figured out who it was and heard it clearly. Because he was the closest to that voice. It was his father. He recognized it. So the problem is not really God speaking words to us.

The problem so often in our life is whether we are really listening to him. So for any one of you who's maybe struggling with a sense of direction, where are you going to go in life?

[23 : 14] What are you going to do? Who are you going to marry? What's your life going to be all about? Ask you the question. Is it because God isn't making himself clear or because you're not clearly listening to him?

A quietness of spirit that will listen can hear this confirmation and affirmation and direction in the path that we need to go.

He knows how to guide you. Trust him with that fact. Trust him as a congregation that he knows how to guide you.

Don't panic about how long you've been vacant and how many times you get rejected and things like that. Trust that you'll hear God's word and it'll be very clear and then follow.

So we need that confirmation. Time and again, you'll need that when you're going through tough times. That you just have a clear word from God. Jesus himself needed it, but he shares it with us.

[24 : 25] So there is cost to mission. There is times when God gives his confirmation in the midst of his calling on our lives. But then the third thing to notice from this passage is the conviction that we must have.

Very firm conviction. Otherwise, mission will fall flat on his face. He tells us in these words that, OK, the hour's coming. OK, he's going to die.

But he says, verse 32, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

This, he said, to show the kind of death he was going to die. So this lifting up of Jesus was, yes, the seed falls into the ground, but he comes back.

Yes, he dies, but he's going to be lifted up. Yes, he's even going to die by being lifted up on a cross, but he'll be lifted up even beyond that in the resurrection.

[25 : 27] And when all of that message is proclaimed to the world, he will do something. What will he do? He will draw people in. He will draw them to himself.

Now, we're 2,000 years on tonight from when Jesus spoke these words. Gives us a little opportunity, doesn't it, to analyse how accurate he was.

And you'd have to say, 2,000 years later, you've got the best part of 3 billion people on the planet who professes some allegiance to Jesus Christ, greater or lesser, but some allegiance to him.

That's not bad going. And he is not finished yet. So here he is, promising, and we're already seeing, fulfilling this promise that as we lift him up, and it is we, we the church, we his father, we lift him up, he will draw men and women to himself.

That's why the Greeks asked to meet him, because there was something so magnetic about Jesus. That's why I met him when I was a student in Aberdeen, because there was something magnetic about Jesus.

[26 : 48] That's how you are listening tonight in your home, because somewhere along the line, you found him magnetic, beyond merely what you were brought up with in the church, but to the moment that you met him yourself.

And he is still drawing people to himself, because of the attraction of who he is, the sheer moral worth of Jesus, the spiritual beauty of Jesus Christ, the power of his words, and the power of the sacrifice of his life, and the purpose of it, justifying us in the eyes of God before God's law.

Because of the power of the Holy Spirit, he is working upon people today, because of the hope of the glory that we have in through Jesus Christ, that when we die and fall into the ground, we too will rise, but to a newness of life, the likes of which we cannot even fully comprehend.

Everything he has done in your life, all the blessings that you have in your life, come from him. When that hits you, what are you going to experience but a drawing?

So the job for us, of course, is to make that clear to people, and to draw people to Christ by lifting him up.

[28 : 10] That's our job. And so he's making that promise here, verse 25. He says, that's not verse 25, I've lost it, but he says basically, when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.

Verse 32, same verse, all people to myself. That doesn't mean something, just want to clarify. It doesn't mean that all people means everybody will be saved.

We call that universalism. That would clash with the rest of scriptures, and it would clash with the context here, because in verse 25, he says some people will lose their life.

Verse 31, he says there is a judgment day. He's making clear there is a distinction in humanity. So what does it mean when he says, I will draw all people to myself?

Well, he's just had these Greeks, these outsiders come, asking for an interview. That's what he means. All kinds of people, all varieties, any sort.

[29 : 14] Jesus might be the exclusive way to God, but he's an incredibly inclusive savior. He'll take anybody. He would accept anybody who would seek, he says, they will find.

So that's actually what it means. And that's why it's a death sentence for the work of Satan and the kingdom of darkness and all the brokenness in this world.

That's why he goes on to say that now, as he is lifted up, that the works of darkness will be destroyed. And Satan's work will be broken and destroyed.

As Jesus is lifted up and the light comes, darkness has to flee. That's what he's saying here. Now, that means for us that we should never give up on anybody.

Because no matter how much they've been under the power of the prince of this world. You've got it in verse 31. Time for judgment on this world.

[30 : 27] Now the prince of this world will be driven out. Talking about Satan there. It says, no matter how firm a grip Satan has on anybody, when Christ is lifted up and the spirit removes the veil, anybody can come to know Jesus Christ.

This is the part. You've got to be convinced of that afresh as a believer. You've got to be convinced and gripped by it again and again and again as a church, as the people. This is true.

When we lift Christ up, no matter how enslaved people might be, and in the darkness, spiritually, Christ can set them free. And indeed, sometimes it's those most enchained that the transformation is so utterly amazing.

For years I've worked with addicts, for years I've worked in prison, and seeing some people from the most broken places, the most enchained situations in life, set free by what we call the expulsive power of a new surge of longing in their hearts and lives.

A love now for Christ. So he can draw anyone to himself. He can reach anyone. He can reach anyone who is lost in your family. He can reach anyone in your place of work, your neighbours, the people that make up your city and the surrounding area and your region.

[31 : 52] If we lift him up, he will draw people in. You don't have to convert anyone when you share the gospel.

That's a wonderful burden-removing thought. When you try and share the gospel, you aren't out to make the conversion happy. You're just out to lift him up. The Holy Spirit will come in and do the impossible bit inside somebody's heart and soul, where you and I cannot reach.

But he's saying, I will, if you lift Jesus up. Our problem is we keep Jesus buried so often. We keep him hidden so often. We keep our Christianity so quiet that we won't say, Buddha, goose.

That's got to change if you want to see God's kingdom grow. And so lift him up. How do you do that? There's many different ways, but I just want to leave you with one image.

It's in the Second World War, when the American Marines conquered the island of Iwojima. There's a very famous picture of five or six of them in a group pushing an American flag up to erect it on the hill.

[33 : 04] Five or six men as they haul this flag. So together they lift the banner up. They lift the flag high. If you could just take that image for a second and think, how do we go about lifting Jesus up that he will draw people in?

Well, you don't just do it alone. Don't think of this in terms of the lonely evangelist where so many of us fail. But if we've got the picture of lifting him up in the community of God's people and how we live and show the reality of the gospel by the way we treat each other and the way we live together and the fellowship that we have together as disciples in Jesus Christ.

That is a major and significant way to lift Jesus up in an unbelieving generation. There's many ways of doing it.

You can lift Jesus up on a one-to-one. You can use gospel summaries. You can ask a friend to meet you for coffee and study the original historical documents in the life of Jesus, which means you sit down and you read John's gospel with them and do that every week.

There's lots of ways you can lift Jesus up, but don't miss the corporate nature. It's how we do church, how we do it well as a community of disciples, where you can then mix your non-Christian friends with your Christian family and mix the two together.

[34 : 25] And that can allow things to happen that might not otherwise happen. In the middle of COVID, when we've been meeting outside and the glorious weather here, you can meet out all year round.

We had a bunch of neighbours all come round to the house, just happen to one after another coming round. And they're all Spanish speaking. And some of the neighbours, just two houses down.

Some of you may know my wife is Colombian. They're from Colombia. Another Colombian came by. We all started talking. Some others came round who are nearby. And some of our family were with us.

This was at Christmas time. We just chatted. We shared. And then one of the neighbours asked a question about God. But how do you know who will be saved or who won't be?

What's the difference between you and us? Because we're Catholics. And it opened up a wonderful opportunity, not just for me to respond, but initially she asked somebody else.

[35 : 21] Then I had a go. And then before we finished, my brother-in-law was able to share with her. So even in that one conversation, there were three conversations coming together. And we all got further along that journey because we did it together.

What would it look like if your two worlds met? Your friends who don't have a clue about Jesus and your friends who love Jesus. And when lockdown is gone and you're allowed to go to football matches and you're allowed to do activities together and you kind of merge those two worlds a little bit more.

And they get a glimpse of the difference Jesus makes in very real ways in people's lives. And then the community that you should have as a church, then you might discover that they are very open.

And they too will be drawn to Jesus because of the sheer beauty of him. So lift him up, lift him high through your lips and your life.

Lift him high through your corporate life together. And then though there's a cost, Psalm 126 reminds us, though we can go out with tears, there will be a reaping and there can be a returning with joy.

[36 : 35] So I pray that you as a congregation will come out of all of this COVID and out of your vacancy and all of that and that you will fly high and that you will lift Jesus Christ.

You have a huge task before you. Our Dean is one of the least reached parts of Scotland. He can do it, but he wants to use you.

Just be willing to pay the price and serve him. Amen. This is God's word. We pray that he will bless it to us and that he will receive our worship and our adoration.

Before we sing our concluding song, I would just like to pray with you, though, before we finish. Let's pray. Our loving Father, thank you for Jesus.

Thank you for the wonder, the power and the beauty of God in the flesh. Thank you that even his enemies couldn't find anything to really pin in him. And even people today who are agnostic or atheistic or of other religions will often struggle to see anything really wrong in Jesus.

[37 : 42] Oh, Lord, give us a boldness to lift him up before the people in which you've called us to live and work and minister amongst.

And we pray, Lord, that you will use Bonacarte to really lift Jesus up. And that you will draw people to yourself as we lift you up.

Let it be, Lord, we pray in your holy name. Amen.