

A Promise You Can Stake Your Eternity On

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Preacher: Joe Hall

- [0 : 0 0] And if you have that open, I'd invite you to keep it open, and we'll look at that together. And as we do that, let's pray for God's help. God, our Father, we thank you that your word is true at all times, and more precious and valuable than gold, even much fine gold.
- And so we pray, our Father, that you would give us a true sense of its value as we come to it now, that you would give us ears to hear and eyes to see, and that you would show us more of the Lord Jesus and our need for him.
- For we pray in Jesus' name, amen. So how do we decide to do the things that we choose to do?
- I read this week, studies suggest the average person makes 35,000 decisions each day. Maybe for some of you that sounds like a slow day in the office.
- Maybe for others that sounds unthinkable high. But if you break that down and take off the hours that you're asleep, that's 2,000 decisions every hour, or one decision every two seconds.
- [1 : 1 9] It's a huge part of our lives, decisions. And obviously, most of those decisions are things we don't have to think about. Our brains make them subconsciously.
- But plenty of those are decisions that we do have to think about. And how we make those decisions is really important. Lots of things play into our decision-making, don't they?
- But today, John wants us to grapple just with one big decision. And he wants us to see the reason that we can make that decision.
- The one reason is a promise. Now, I wonder if you can think of decisions that you have made based on promises. Susie and I and Caleb went to a wedding last weekend.
- We enjoyed celebrating with our friends, of course. But the main reason we were there was to see our friends make promises to one another. Because those promises that they made on their wedding day are so deep and far-reaching that every decision they make from then on will be based on those promises.
- [2 : 3 6] The guests were called to witness those promises, to help the couple, to be true to those promises and the decisions that they made. And so, if you're married, your decisions are based on promises every day.
- And if you have friends who are married, at times that means holding those friends to those promises. Helping them to keep those promises and the choices that they make.
- Another example would be money. Now, I can't remember the last time I paid for something in cash. Okay, but if you read the fine print on your fiver, you will find that every decision that you make to spend or receive money involves a promise.
- It says on there, I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of five pounds. So, the note is a promise to pay. If that promise can't be kept, well, sad to say, the note in my pocket has no value at all.
- Our entire economy rests on a promise when people can't keep that promise to pay. Well, the economy folds. And so, promises, they are at the heart of our most basic decisions in life, day in and day out.

[3 : 58] And here in our passage, God makes a promise. And it is so big and far-reaching that he can ask us to make the biggest decision of our lives on the basis of this promise.

God's promise here is to glorify Jesus. And the decision he invites each of us to make on the back of that promise is therefore to follow Jesus, whatever that might cost.

Okay, so to get us there, John, he gives us three requests, each followed by an answer, to lead us to trust that promise and as a result to follow Jesus. And the first request is there in verse 21.

We would like to see Jesus. And the answer is there in verse 26. Whoever serves me, says Jesus, must follow me.

So firstly then, whoever wants what Jesus gives needs to follow Jesus. Now, the setting of this conversation is really important.

[5 : 08] Perhaps if you've been with us, you've picked up. John's gospel is very Jewish. Okay, we're in chapter 12. And so far, there's only been one time Jesus has spoken to someone who isn't straightforwardly Jewish.

And that was the Samaritan woman. And we saw even then that the Samaritans would have kind of been seen as a sort of semi-Jewish because of their history.

And so here in chapter 12, verse 20, we have our first completely non-Jewish people, some Greeks. And they're here at the Passover festival.

Why? Well, they tell us, don't they? We would like to see Jesus. Now, this is huge because back then, humanity would have been viewed as basically two kinds of people.

Okay, Jewish people and the rest of the world. And the reason this is such a huge moment, because now for the first time in this gospel, the rest of the world is coming to look for Jesus.

[6 : 13] Okay, non-Jews, the religious leaders' greatest fears have come true. Look how the whole world has gone after him. And for Jesus, this signals a shift in his ministry, in his life.

Jesus, the hour has come, he says. The hour has come, because now the whole world is coming to find him.

Now, this hour has been coming for a long time. Way back in chapter 2, Jesus says, it's not time for him to show his glory in public yet, because my hour has not come.

Now, we're told twice again in chapters 7 and 8, his hour had not yet come. So, it's as if from the beginning, the clock has been running down to this moment, the minute hand steadily ticking to the top of the hour.

And now, says Jesus, the hour has come. And it is the hour for, verse 21, the Son of Man to be glorified. In short, the time has finally come for Jesus to be held up for the whole world to see.

[7 : 29] But how? How will that happen? What is scheduled for this hour? Well, what is scheduled is a death that gives life. Jesus tells us that in this parable.

He tells, very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

A death that gives life. We at home started growing some sunflowers last week. Thankfully, they're just in pots inside. Otherwise, they'd never have made it through the snow and ice, would they?

But as one of these little sprouts came up, it actually had the shell of the seed still kind of stuck to it on the top. So I peeled it off and thought, you know, it's amazing, isn't it?

This plant has grown out of this seed. And then I threw it away. And I've been kicking myself for that because it's a perfect illustration of what Jesus is saying. The seed had to die for the plant to live.

[8 : 36] You can keep the seed and not put it in the ground and not have a plant. Or you can put the seed in the ground and it will die and you can have a plant, but you can't have the seed and the plant.

That's not how it works, is it? And in the same way, in the same way, Jesus is saying for him to give eternal life, he will have to die.

It can't be any other way. His glory will be in giving eternal life to many, producing many seeds. But for him to do that, he will have to die and be buried in the ground like a seed.

He puts the same idea another way in verse 32. He says, I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

How would Jesus be lifted up and held high and glorified? Well, by being crucified, he says. He said it to show the kind of death he was going to die.

[9 : 44] He would be lifted up from the earth by the nails, holding his hands and his feet to the cross. But when that happens, he says, when he dies, what will be the result?

I will draw all people to myself. His death will give life to many, not just one sort of person or one camp, but to all kinds of people.

Not only the Jews, but to the rest of the world also. And so, friends, Jesus wants us to know this morning, whoever we are, wherever we come from, Jesus' forever glory and our forever good are bound up in his death.

If he had not died, we could not have life with God. And whoever we are, whether we're new to Jesus, like the Greeks were, or whether we've been around forever, like the Jews, his death is how he saves, how he gives us eternal life.

But here's the twist, okay? If we want what Jesus gives, which is eternal life, he says we need to follow him. Follow him through his death.

[11 : 05] Jesus' invitation, it's wide open, isn't it? See that in verses 25 and 26? He talks about anyone, whoever. He is really holding himself out for the whole world to see.

There's no one who could come to Jesus and hear him say, it wasn't really you I meant to come. No, he says, whoever we are, anyone, come and live.

But to receive this gift of life, our response has to be total. See that? What does Jesus want the anyone, the whoever to do?

Anyone who loves their life will lose it. Well, anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.

And where I am, my servant also will be. Lay down your life, he says. That's what he means by love and hate there.

[12 : 16] He's not saying that we have to hate ourselves. Rather, he is saying, if we try to hold on to our lives here and now, it will slip through our fingers. But if we let go of our lives here and now, we will keep them forever.

How does that work? Well, that is exactly how Jesus gives life, isn't it? Letting go of his own life so that we could have life forever.

And so for us to gain that life that he gives, he says we too need to let go of our lives, to die with him. Because only then will we rise to life with him if we follow him through his death.

Whoever serves me must follow me, he says. And where is he going? Well, he's just told us, hasn't he? To be lifted up on a cross and buried in the ground.

And so, friends, whoever we are, wherever we are from, that is where we must follow him if we are to have the life that he holds out.

[13 : 30] The invitation is for everyone. But it costs everything to say yes. Taking hold of life forever with him means letting go of our own lives, dying to ourselves, letting go of our own direction, values, meaning, submitting, following his direction, his values, his meaning.

Now, perhaps you're thinking he can do that. Who would follow Jesus all the way to death, put ourselves to death to follow him?

Who would do that? Perhaps you're still kind of thinking it through. You're wondering, how could I go through with it? Perhaps you've followed Jesus for a long time, and you sometimes have second thoughts.

Well, Jesus promises there in verse 26. Okay, this is the promise. My father will honor the one who serves me.

My father will honor the one who serves me. And next, we can stake our lives, we can stake our eternity on that promise.

[14 : 40] So, whoever wants what Jesus gives needs to follow Jesus. But secondly, we see, whoever wants to follow Jesus needs to believe God's promise.

Because if we don't believe the promise, well, how could we ever have the confidence to give ourselves totally to following and dying with and for Jesus?

And to bring this home is striking, isn't it? That thought even overwhelmed Jesus himself. You see that in verse 27? What's the next thing he says? Now my soul is troubled.

That's a very English way of saying it. Classic understatement. Like watching a car crash and saying, oh, that wasn't very good, was it? In the original language, that word troubled means horrified, shocked.

Jesus is saying the deepest part of his being was touched and terrified by the thought of his death. Why?

[15 : 47] Well, partly, no doubt, because of the trauma of the physical suffering he was anticipating. But first and foremost, because of the eternal and spiritual consequences, he would die for the sins of the world and his soul would be crushed.

As his father turned from him and his perfect, full and holy anger weighed down upon him for the sins of many. You people have gone bravely, haven't they, to much worse deaths than crucifixion.

But there is only one person who has suffered God's anger against the sins of the world. And that is what rightly horrified Jesus, the thought of that death.

Now, if you read to the end of John, you'll notice there's something missing that the other three gospel writers all include. And that is Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane before his rest.

But for John, this is that moment. The moment when Jesus stared his death in the face and asked not to have to go through with it.

[17 : 03] What shall I say? Says Jesus. Now, our translation here, the NIV, it puts a question mark at the end of that next sentence.

Father, it saved me from this hour. But in the original, there's a strong suggestion that that's not meant to be a kind of hypothetical question, but an actual prayer that Jesus prayed.

Father, it saved me from this hour. Let this cup pass from me, if it is possible. If there is a way for me not to have to do it this way, let it be done.

And so, friends, let's be clear. If that's how Jesus felt about this death, he who came in love freely to die for us, well, how can we possibly follow him unless our trust is wholly in the promise of God that it will not end in death, but instead in glory?

Well, that is exactly the promise that God gives us at this point to give us that reason we need to follow him. Okay, so having prayed that God would spare him having to die that death, Jesus puts his confidence in God to see that it would work and be worth it.

[18 : 29] No, he says, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. That's the request. And here's the answer we need to hear.

Okay, what does the Father say back? Have a look there if you can at verse 28. Then a voice came from heaven. I have glorified it and will glorify it again.

God, the Father, promises Jesus' death will result in glory. It's as if Jesus has come to this point and prayed, Father, promise me it's going to work.

And God says, I promise. Just as I have brought glory now, up to now, through your life, so I will give glory through your death.

You can count on it. You know what incredible words to hear that would have stilled and calmed and quieted the soul of Jesus as his death loomed over him.

[19 : 34] It's a promise that that he would give his life to see come true. But here's the amazing thing that the crowd heard those words too. And Jesus says, verse 30, the voice was for your benefit, not mine.

Your benefit. However much confidence those words would have given to Jesus, he says it was meant for you. To give you that confidence that on the other side of my death is glory.

To give you that confidence to follow me through death and into glory. It is God's promise to Jesus, but it is God's promise for us.

You began by thinking, didn't you, about the power that promises have in our lives to root and ground our decisions? Well, here I would dare to say that this is the biggest promise that God has ever made.

That if we do follow Jesus, if we do lose and let go of our lives for him, whoever we are, that we will gain eternal life with him forever.

[20 : 47] That is what God says. And the reason that he gives us that promise, the reason he said it to the crowd on that day, is to give us a firm and unchanging and shatterproof basis to decide to follow Jesus.

He would lose their life for a crucified king unless they were sure that it would be worth it. If God had said, maybe it will bring glory, he would take him up on that.

If I or another person said to you, follow Jesus and you will have glory, probably you would have doubts and you would be right to have doubts. But when God says, not me, not anyone else, but God himself promises you that through Jesus' death there will be glory or whoever follows him, well, that should give us real confidence, complete security.

And so, if we do want to follow Jesus, we need to believe his promise. And the question I want to put to you today is simply this, do you believe it?

Do you believe that promise? Okay, perhaps you've been coming to church for a short time, a few weeks, a few months, it's new to you, you're still figuring Jesus out, you've got loads of questions, you feel like you just need to know more.

[22 : 30] Well, let me say to you, if that's you, it's great that you're here. Keep coming, keep finding out, keep searching for Jesus. And as you do that, keep asking yourself, is this someone that I could trust with my life?

And if that is you, I'd love to talk more with you about that. But perhaps you've been hearing the Christian message for a long time. Perhaps you've been coming for years and you still don't know whether you can trust him.

The question is, if that's you, how much more do you need to know? before you do decide? Is it really a question of needing to know more or giving it more time?

Or is it a question of responding rightly to what you already know to be true? Perhaps you are a Christian.

Maybe you're starting out. Maybe you've been a Christian for many years. But sometimes the question comes back, is it worth it? Is losing my life for this man, is that the right decision after all?

[23 : 42] You know, I want to say, no matter how long we've been a Christian, we can all have doubts and wonder about that sometimes. Well, for us, this promise is one to keep in mind, isn't it? Because it gives us a firm place to stand, words to answer back to our doubts with.

Jesus promises, my father will honor the one who serves me. Jesus shrank back from his death.

It is natural and not surprising that sometimes we do too. But he gives us these words that we can stake our eternity on from God. And let's not forget that they have been proved to be true by the fact that Jesus didn't stay dead and buried, but is now risen and alive.

His followers saw him alive again. Back from the dead, they touched him, they ate with him, they heard him, they watched him be taken up to heaven. God's promise of life and glory, it's not empty words.

But they were proved to be true through the resurrection of Jesus. And so, friends, believe these words. Stake your life upon them.

[24 : 55] Because if we want to follow Jesus, we need to believe God's promise. And finally, perhaps most challengingly of all, John tells us whoever wants to know if it's true, well, they need to follow Jesus.

If you want to know it's true, you need to follow Jesus. And the crowd who heard God's voice that day wanted to know more. In verse 34, we've heard from the law that the Messiah will remain forever.

So how can you say the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man? They're asking, could it be true? How do we know it's true? How does it fit with what we already know?

What do you mean, Jesus? They've listened and they want to know. Well, look at Jesus' answer then in verse 35. Jesus told them, you're going to have the light just a little while longer.

Walk while you have the light before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they're going. Believe in the light while you have the light so that you may become children of light.

[26 : 09] In short, if you want to know I am God's forever king, the Messiah, the Christ, if you want to know whether my death can really give you life, you're going to have to trust me.

You're going to have to trust me. We've seen this language of light and dark before in this gospel. Jesus has said as we began our service, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life. So, to follow him is to walk in the light. And so, while he's still there with them, he's saying, they have the opportunity to find out for themselves whether everything he's saying is true.

But soon, he won't be there with them. The light will have gone and the opportunity will have gone with it. And so, he says, walk while you have the light before the darkness overtakes you.

And with that, he leaves the crowd with this decision to make. Will we choose to trust him and find out for ourselves whether his words are true while we have the chance? Or will we decide not to trust him or to sit on the fence and wait to find out whether we should have trusted him only after it's too late?

[27 : 30] And each of us today has that same decision to make. Here is Jesus holding out himself to whoever today, presenting us with his life-giving death, giving us God's sure promise that through his death there is life with God.

And so, today, whoever we are, we can find out whether that is true by putting our trust in him, walking in the light. He gives us the confidence we need to do that.

He even gives us the faith we need to do that. But nobody can trust him for you. Nobody can trust him for you. And Jesus makes it so clear what he wants for us in verse 36.

Believe in the light while you have the light so that you might be children of light. It's just another way of saying what John told us way back in chapter 1.

To all who did receive Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. And that is what Jesus wants for us today.

[28 : 34] because the time is coming, says Jesus, when that decision won't be open to us anymore. It's a stark warning, but he warns us in love because he doesn't want the door to close on us any more than we do.

You're going to have the light just a little while longer, he says. For the crowd, that was because Jesus was less than a week away from being taken and killed.

But after being killed, he rose from the dead and says he will return one day to bring this world to an end. And for us, that is the day the light goes out.

That is the day the opportunity closes. And Jesus is simply saying, don't wait for that day to come and for the decision to be made for you.

Follow me while you have me here. Believe in the light while you have the light. Jesus is incredibly patient with us. But here he reminds us that that decision is still urgent.

[29 : 47] And so let me urge you this morning, if you have not decided this question for yourself, don't put it off. Find out what you need to know.

Ask the questions that you have. Wrestle with it. Think it through. Talk to people here. But whatever you do, don't wait. Don't sit on this question.

Don't wait until it feels right. Or for the right time to come. Or until you feel good enough. No, when you have settled this question, now is the right time.

because this time won't last forever. Jesus gives us this promise so that we might trust him and follow him through his death into life and glory forever.

Will you follow him? God, let's pray for that together now. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for your promise to us that whoever would put their trust in Jesus will have eternal life.

[31 : 04] We praise you because we know that we don't deserve that. Lord, who could come to you and live? Lord, if you were to keep a record of our sins, who could stand before you?

That Jesus reminds us today, with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. And so we pray, our Father, that you would lead us to him again and again.

We thank you, Father, for giving us a new heart to trust him. We pray, Father, that his death would not cause us to shrink back, but rather that we would see in his death his glory from eternity, that we would see in his death his gift of life, and that we would embrace him for all that he is worth.

Lord, for those here who are yet to do that, we pray that you would grant the gift of life and of faith to trust and follow the Lord Jesus. Lord, for those of us who have, we pray for the continuing faith, to continue to follow him.

Lord, not to shrink back from him, not to have doubts, but to know for certain that in him is life. Lord, this we pray in his wonderful name.

[32 : 28] Amen.