



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

JOHN 11-12

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LOOKING FOR THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

Throughout the years, biblical scholars and theologians have searched for the historical Jesus. They have sought to know all they can about Jesus in his historical context. While this can certainly be a worthwhile and profitable study, I contend that there is another search that is more universal: searching for the essential Jesus.

It is a search that can be done without advanced degrees or seminary clout because all of us are designed to know him. It has been said and quoted many times that we all have a God-shaped vacuum inside, and we only find true satisfaction when it is filled with him. Since Jesus came to reveal the true nature of God, we know that he is the one who satisfies. Yet, many searchers still believe that they can find their treasure in other objects or experiences.

The Gospel of John relates the occasion when Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and caused a

stir in the community and nation. This is the seventh miracle sign that John uses to make his point about Jesus being the fulfillment of the Word of God. It got the attention of all who heard about it. Chapters 11 and 12 mention three groups that were looking for Jesus at that time. **The crowds were curious** (John 11:55-57). They had heard about his mighty works and some may have even heard some of his teachings. They wondered if he would come as the Passover festival was being celebrated. Some probably sensed there might be a showdown in the streets between Jesus and his opponents. **The Jewish**

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leaders were furious. They had tried to ignore Jesus at times or to discredit him and his miracles. But when Lazarus was raised after four days in the grave, they were incensed. They strategized to arrest Jesus and kill Lazarus. It frightened them that their strongest power was the threat of death, and Jesus had just destroyed that. Finally, there were some Greeks who came to the festival. **The Greeks were serious.** These intellectual philosophers came from a culture that was esteemed to be much more enlightened. Yet they came to a Jewish festival and were looking for Jesus.

We shall investigate this text as to how Jesus said anyone can see him, but first let's glance back in history and see how universal it is for people to seek to see Jesus, and how their lives change when they do. Abraham saw him in the ram caught in the bramble when he was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Moses saw him in the bush aflame with fire and heard him speak. Joshua, when fearful of fighting a fearful foe,

saw him as the captain of God's army. David saw him as the king. Solomon saw him as wisdom. Isaiah saw him in the temple when the nation's good king had died, and things were unstable. Ezekiel saw him as the wheel in the middle of a wheel. Jeremiah saw him in the potter whose vessel had become marred and he remade it. The three Hebrew children (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) saw him in the fiery furnace. Daniel saw him in the lions' den. Mary saw him in a manger and pondered. The disciples saw him asleep in the bow of the boat during a threatening storm. One thief saw him on a cross. The pair on the road to Emmaus saw him in the breaking of the bread. Paul saw him in a light on the road to Damascus.

Once our eyes are opened, we can see him anywhere.

But there is an essential dynamic if we are to see the real Jesus in full clarity. Jesus's response to the request of

the Greeks is strange to the natural eye (John 12:20–26). You might think that he would simply set an appointment to let them interview him. (“I have a slot open on my calendar at 2:00 PM.”) But his response revealed the nature of his kingdom and the key to seeing both him and his kingdom: “. . . unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (v. 24, ESV). He is saying that the dynamic of death and resurrection is the central pattern and power of his kingdom. It is mysterious and mighty. We see this in the common grain of wheat. We watch the Son of God die in our place and arise the third day. We experience it in our lives as dashed hopes become new worlds of discovery.

It is spring in Texas, and my grandsons wanted to plant a garden. They wanted to include pumpkins to have the best jack-o'-lanterns in the fall. I showed them a single pumpkin seed which is about the size of the little fingernail. The seed packet said it

would produce a vine 8 feet in diameter and as many as 20 pumpkins. I've never counted the number of seeds in a pumpkin, but that is a good ratio. First the seed must die. Only as it gives up its present state can new life come forth with all the potential. The boys check it each day to see if it has sprouted. Their anticipation grows, but it seems to them that time is standing still. Yet, “we shall reap, if we faint not” (Galatians 6:9).

Why this way? It is God's way of astounding us with his grace and glory. In Jesus' crucifixion, he revealed the severe nature of sin. It cannot be managed or curtailed. It must die. His grace is manifested in that he became sin and died so we didn't have to. He went further and gave us his very own life with resurrection power embedded. Those who try to see the real Jesus apart from participating in his death and resurrection will not be successful. They may know all about the historical Jesus. They may admire his insightful teaching. They may stand in awe of his

miraculous power. But they won't see him fully or clearly except in death and resurrection.

This shared life offers us ample opportunity to experience the dynamic of death and resurrection. We have hopes and dreams that are precious to us. We wait, in faith, for promises we have claimed to be fulfilled. Prophecies have been made that energized our faith. When they all come crashing down and life turns gray, we experience a death. A clear example is the account of the two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus after the crucifixion. They had hoped that Jesus was the long-awaited deliverer. They had acted on that hope by giving up their previous vocations to follow him. But the Jewish and Roman powers had unjustly put him to death, and the disciples were in despair. Their eyes were closed to the very alive Jesus walking with them. After he explained the real meaning of the Old Testament scriptures and broke bread with them, they saw him. Their lives were changed forever. They

faced many obstacles to their faith and opportunities to see death and life happen again. Eventually the testimony of those who faced death without fear began to spread throughout the whole known world. Where the cross-resurrection dynamic was central, true Christianity flourished. When it was devalued for some form of ethical teaching or political ploy, it became like salt that lost its power, and light that is placed under a bushel.

The death and resurrection of Christ is not just an event we celebrate once a year. It is the energizing force of the kingdom of God. We each have opportunities to continue to believe even in the face of seemingly hopeless circumstances. Each time we do, we see Jesus.



P.O. Box 2022
Colleyville, TX 76034
(817) 267-9224
Fax: (817) 354-5522
Email: Mail@KerygmaVentures.com
www.KerygmaVentures.com