This story contains interesting points that are similar to the ones recorded in John 4 - the story of the woman by the well. In both situations, Jesus comes into contact with people who are not a part of the Jewish church. In both, He takes the opportunity to speak in vivid terms about a time that is coming (no, about a time which has come) which will usher in a glorious new era for the kingdom of God. In both, He uses the most intense, emphatic terms to express His devotion to His Father’s will, His faith in the future spread of the gospel, and His great hope of gaining a personal reward in glory (Jn. 6:34-36). Finally, in both stories, He uses agricultural metaphors to express His thoughts. With the woman at the well, He borrows His figure of speech from the process of reaping. In the narrative before us, He uses the metaphor of sowing.

But even though there are similarities, there are also marked differences in these two passages from the life of the Lord Jesus. The most notable one is this: With the woman at the well, Jesus felt nothing but enthusiasm, joy, and hope. Now these feelings are blended with deep sadness. His soul is not only elated about His hope for the glory that is coming, but it is troubled as He anticipates the impending disaster. The reason is because His death is about to take place. Within three days He must be lifted up on the cross, and every human being tries to avoid the bitter cup of suffering.

While we observe the presence of a new emotion, we also see that its presence does not stop the old emotions that Jesus manifested when he interviewed the woman of Samaria. On the contrary, the nearness of His death allows the Savior the opportunity to give greater intensity to the expression of His devotion, faith, and hope. In the past, He said that doing His Father’s will was more important than food. Now He says, in essence, that it is more important than life (Jn. 12:28). At the beginning, He had seen, with the eye of faith, a vast number of fields that were already white for the harvest. They were in the wilderness of the Gentiles. Now, He not only continues to see these fields in the face of His approaching passion, but He sees them as the fruit of it. He sees a whole world of golden grain growing out of one seed of wheat that is thrown to the ground. It produces fruit by its own death (vs. 24). At the well of Sychar (Jn. 4:5-6), He had spoken with a living hope about the rewards that were in store for Him, and for all fellow laborers in the kingdom of God, whether they were sowers or reapers. Here, death is swallowed.
up in victory by the power of His hope. To suffer is to enter into glory. To be lifted up on the cross is to be exalted to heaven and seated on the throne of a world-wide dominion (12:23,32).

About the Greek Men
The men who wanted to see Jesus while He stood in one of the courts of the temple were Greeks (Jn. 12:20). We do not know where they came from - whether from east or west, from north or south. But they were evidently determined to enter into the kingdom of God. They had already come a long distance on their way to the kingdom. The assumption, at least, is that they had left paganism behind and had embraced the faith of one living, true God, as the Jews taught. At this time, they had come up to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover as Jewish proselytes. But it seems that they did not have rest in their souls. There was something more to be known about God that was still hidden from them. They hoped to learn about this from Jesus. Somehow they had become acquainted with His name and fame. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to them to communicate with one of the men who belonged to His company, they respectfully told him about their desire to meet his Master. They said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (Jn. 12:21). By themselves, the words might be nothing more than a curious desire to get a momentary glimpse of someone who had the reputation of being a remarkable man. However, this interpretation must be rejected on the grounds that their request awakened deep emotions in Jesus’ heart. Idle curiosity would not have moved His soul in this way. Also, the idea that these Greeks were simply curious strangers is completely inconsistent with the manner in which the story is introduced. John inserts the present narrative immediately after quoting a statement that was made by the Pharisees about the popularity that was growing for Jesus because He had raised Lazarus from the dead. They said, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him” (vs. 19). In essence, John answers, “Yes, indeed, and to an extent that you cannot imagine. The One you hate is beginning to be sought after, even by Gentiles that have come a long way. The history that is coming will demonstrate that what I am saying is true.”

We are thinking correctly, then, to regard the Greek strangers as sincere inquirers. They were true seekers after God. They were genuine spiritual descendants of their illustrious countrymen, Socrates and Plato, whose written or unwritten sayings were one long prayer for light and truth, one deep, unconscious longing for a look at Jesus. They wanted to see the Savior, not only with the body, but, above everything else, with the eye of the spirit.

Philip and Andrew
The part that was played by Philip and Andrew needs to be mentioned briefly. They had the honor of being the means of communication between the representatives of the Gentile world and the One who had come to fulfill the desire of all the nations and be their Savior. The devout Greeks introduced themselves to Philip, and he, in turn, counseled with Andrew about
the matter. We do not know how Philip was selected to receive the request from these Gentile inquirers. Some have noted that the name Philip is Greek, implying a probability that he had Greek connections. There is even the possibility that he had previous contact with these men. There may be something to these conjectures, but it is more important to note that the Greeks were happy with their choice of an intercessor. Philip himself was an inquirer. So he had compassion on all those who thought the same way he did. The first time he is mentioned in the Gospel history, he is introduced as someone who is sharing his faith in Jesus with others. He had carefully sought the truth, and once he found what he was looking for, he tried to have others share in the blessing. “Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, ‘We have found Him, of whom Moses in the Law, and the Prophets, wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (Jn. 1:45). The exactness and fullness of this confession tells us much about his careful and conscientious search. Philip still has an inquirer’s temperament. A day or two after this meeting with the Greeks, we find him making another important request: “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (Jn. 14:8).

Why doesn’t this compassionate disciple take the Greeks’ request directly to Jesus? Why does he take Andrew with him? Is he afraid to go alone on such an errand, just because the ones asking are Greeks and Gentiles? It is one thing to introduce a devout Jew like Nathanael to Jesus. It is quite another thing to introduce Gentiles, no matter how devout they are. Philip is pleased that they are inquiring about his Master, but he is not sure how appropriate it would be to act on his first impulse. He hesitates. He is very excited about what he perceives to be a new thing, a significant event, the beginning of a religious revolution. His tendency is to become an intercessor for the Greeks. But he distrusts his own judgment. So, before he acts on it, he presents the case to his fellow-disciple and fellow-townsman, Andrew. He wants to know how the matter strikes him. The result of this consultation was that the two disciples went to tell their Master. They felt perfectly safe in mentioning the matter to Him and then in allowing Him to do as He pleased.

**Jesus’ Response to the Seekers**

From John’s narrative, we learn that the communication from the two disciples powerfully stirred the soul of Jesus. When people who were strangers to the commonwealth of Israel (non-Jews) showed an openness to spiritual matters, Jesus’ heart was always moved. The following people, for instance, touched Him deeply: the people of Sychar who were so open-minded; the Roman centurion who had such simple faith; the Syro-Phoenician woman who had a quick-witted faith; and the Samaritan leper who was so grateful. These expressions of spiritual life that were manifested from different areas of the country, came upon His spirit like breezes on an Æolian harp (a simple stringed instrument that is made to sound by the currents of air. It is usually placed at or near an open window and consists of a box of thin wood in which are stretched numerous strings of equal length, tuned in unison) and produced the sweetest tones of faith, hope, joy, and love. On the other hand, these winds sometimes produced sad, mournful tones
of disappointment and sorrow, like the sighing of the autumn wind among Scottish pines. This occurred when He thought about the unbelief and spiritual deadness of the chosen people for whom He had done so much (Jn. 12:37-43). His heart had never been more deeply affected than at this time. It should not surprise us! What sight is more moving than that of a human being seeking after God who is the fountain of light and of life! The spontaneity of these Greek inquirers is also beautiful. In this unspiritual, unbelieving world, it is something to be thankful for when people here and there respond to God's call and receive His Word which has been spoken to them. But here we have the rare occurrence of men coming who have not been called. They were not sought after by Christ. They did not accept Him because He offered Himself to them as a Savior and Lord. They sought after Him and begged for a great favor. They wanted to be admitted into His presence so they could offer Him their sincere worship and hear Him speak the words of eternal life. They have come from an unusual place. It is even more worthy to take note of the fact that they came at a very critical time. Jesus is just about to be conclusively rejected by His own people, just before He is crucified by them. Some have shut their eyes, stopped up their ears, and hardened their hearts against Him and His teaching. Others, who could plainly see His good points, have mealy and heartlessly hidden their convictions. They were afraid of the consequences of making a public confession. The saying of Isaiah has been fulfilled in His bitter experience, “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Is. 53:1). Pharisaism, Sadduceeism, ignorance, indifference, fickleness, and cowardice have confronted Him on every side. These people who contradicted themselves were ignorant and so spiritually dead that they could not be moved from their position. And in the midst of all of this, Jesus experienced the refreshing words that were brought to Him at the eleventh hour: “Here are certain Greeks who are interested in You and want to see you!” The words fall on His ears like a chorus of sweet music. The news revives His burdened spirit like the sight of a spring to a weary traveler in a sandy desert. In the fullness of His joy, He exclaims: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn. 12:23). Rejected by His own people, He is consoled by the inspiring assurance that He will be believed on in the world. He will be accepted by all the nations for all of their salvation and all of their desire.

**Death and Fruitfulness**

The thoughts of Jesus at this time were as deep as His emotions were intense. It is remarkable that the first thought He expressed was: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24). He speaks in a solemn way indicating He is aware of the fact that He is announcing a new and strange truth to His hearers. His goal is to make it believable and understandable to His disciples that death and fruitfulness go together. He points out to them that this is the way it is in the case of grain. He also wanted them to understand that the law of fruitfulness will be equally as true in His own situation. This law will be true not only in spite of death but also by virtue of His death. “A grain of wheat becomes fruitful when it dies. So I must die in order to become, on a large
scale, an object of faith and source of life. During my lifetime, I have had little success. Few have believed; many have not believed. And they are about to finalize their unbelief by putting me to death. But my death - even though they think it will be my defeat and destruction - will only be the beginning of my glorification. After I have been crucified, people will begin to believe in Me extensively as the Lord and Savior of mankind.”

Jesus uses the analogy of the grain of wheat to set forth death as the condition for fruitfulness. Now, in a word that He spoke on another occasion, He proclaimed His approaching crucifixion as the secret of His future power. He said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). He used the expression “lifted up” in a double sense. First, He alludes to the way He will die. And secondly, He is referring to His ascension into heaven. He was saying that after He had been taken up into glory, He would turn the eyes and hearts of people to Himself through the cross. This statement might sound strange before the event actually happened. But the fact corresponded to the Savior’s expectation. The cross - a symbol of shame! - did become a source of glory. The sign of weakness became an instrument of moral power. Christ crucified, which to unbelieving Jews was a stumbling block and to philosophic Greeks was foolishness, became to many believers the power of God and the wisdom of God. By His voluntary humiliation and meek endurance of suffering, the Son of God drew men to Him in the sincerest faith and devoted themselves to Him with reverential love.

The greatness of Christ’s desires and expectations is very noteworthy. He speaks about “much fruit,” and about drawing “all men” to Himself. Of course, we should not look here for an exact definition of the extent of redemption. Jesus is speaking out of the fullness of His heart about His high and holy hope. We may not be able to learn about the theological extent of the atonement, but we are able to learn from His impassioned words about the extensiveness of the Atoner’s good wishes. He desired for all people to believe in Him and be saved. With great sadness, He spoke about the small number of believers among the Jews. He turned with unspeakable longing to the Gentiles, hoping to get a better reception from them. The greater number of believers at any time and in any place, the more He is pleased. And He is certainly not indifferent about the vast amount of unbelief which still prevails in all parts of the world. His heart is set on removing the prince of this world from his usurped dominion in order that He Himself might reign over all the kingdoms of the earth.

An Application
The story contains an application for Jesus’ disciples. It comes from the law of fruitfulness by death. In essence, Jesus tells them that the law applied to them as well as to Himself (Jn. 12:25-26). At first, this seems surprising. We are tempted to think that the sayings recorded here by the evangelist are mentioned because of their true historical connection. But when we reconsider the issue, we begin to think differently. We notice that in every situation, wherever possible,
Christ’s teaching brings His disciples into partnership with Himself. He does not insist on those aspects of truth that are unique to Him, but rather on those which are common to Him and His followers. When there is any point of contact, any sense in which what He says about Himself is true of those who believe in Him, He seizes the moment and makes it a prominent part of His message. This is what He did when He met the woman at the well. This is what He did when He first plainly announced to His disciples that He was to be put to death. And this is what He does here. He asserts that there is a fellowship between Himself and His followers with respect to the necessity of death as a condition of fruitfulness. And the fellowship that He asserts is not some dreamy notion. It is a great, practical reality. This is the principle He teaches: In proportion to the depths that a man partakes in Christ’s suffering in His state of humiliation, he will be a partaker of the glory, honor, and power which belongs to His state of exaltation. This principle holds true even in this life. Bearing the cross - experiencing death - is the condition of fruit-bearing, both in the sense of personal sanctification and in the sense of effective service in the kingdom of God. In the long-run, the measure of a man’s power is the extent to which he is baptized into Christ’s death. We must fill up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions in our flesh for His body’s sake, which is the church, if we want to be honored instruments who are advancing that great work in the world for which He was willing, like a grain of wheat, to fall into the ground and die (Col. 1:24).

As much as this statement stands out, it is not to be included with other sayings that contain a distinct contribution to the doctrine of the cross. No new principle is contained in this one. Old views are restated - the views taught in the first and second lessons are combined. This is what they teach: death is a condition for life (Mt. 16:25; Jn. 12:25) and for power (Mt. 20:28; Jn. 12:24). Even the original statement about the grain of wheat shows us no new aspect of Christ’s death. It only helps us by giving a familiar analogy so we can understand how death can be a means to fruitfulness. The primary reason for the preceding chapter is to show us how far the gospel would travel. Jesus anticipated this when He spoke about Mary’s act of anointing. It also serves as a contrast to the next chapter about the doom of Jerusalem.