

## Chapter 13

### The Gospel of John

Chapter 13 marks a shift in the story of Jesus according to John. His public ministry is over. The last sign has been performed and he gave a summary of his teaching at the end of Chapter 12. At this point, Jesus retreats together with his disciples in order to prepare them for what is to come. The beginning of the story of Jesus' passion starts now.

The festival of the Passover is about to start. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus celebrates his last supper with the disciples on the day of Passover. In John there is no last supper. Moreover, he gathers with the disciples, not on Passover, but before. In fact, for John, the crucifixion takes place the day before Passion when the lambs were being butchered for the families who were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.

The story begins with a narrative of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. There are two levels of meaning here. First, the washing of feet was a customary gesture of hospitality. When a guest arrived at someone's home, one of the servants in the household would wash the dust off the guest's feet. Jesus here is playing the role of a servant to illustrate the fact that becoming a disciple means becoming a servant. He is demonstrating what this means for his disciples.

However, as water was used for rites of purification so as to become "clean" after having defiled oneself in some way, Jesus is symbolizing that he is their purification before God.

When he gets to Peter, Peter objects and says he will not allow Jesus to humble himself in such a way for him. Peter is thinking in the terms of this world. No Lord washes or serves those of a lower status. This does not represent the values of a Christian disciple. Contrary to the values of the world, servant-hood is a necessary part of discipleship. And so Jesus warns Peter that if he does not wash his feet, Peter can have no part of him.

Peter, as usual, does not understand that Jesus' gesture is symbolic of the fact that he has come to "purify" or make him right with God. And so Jesus tells him that he will understand in due time.

After the foot washing ritual, Jesus explains that he has set an example for them—that as he has done, they should do as well. He also, for the first time, makes reference to the fact that one of their number will betray him. While he is cognizant of the fact that this betrayal is part of the divine plan in fulfillment of the scripture, nevertheless, he is troubled.

This is an example of a tension we see in other places in the biblical story. There are many things that occur in service of the divine plan for salvation. Some of them are not pleasant. The betrayal of Jesus is one of them. The tension arises from the fact that someone, or some group, has to act in ways that will bring extreme guilt and divine disfavor. Judas' betrayal is one of these instances. Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery is another. Jesus himself once said, "Offenses must come. But woe to those by whom they come."

Sinful behavior used by God in order to fulfill his purposes is a demonstration of God's ultimate control of history. Nothing humans do can frustrate God's will or plan for salvation. Nevertheless, this is not to be understood as an excuse for the sinful behavior. If that were the case, then the message would be that God condones sin and does not require repentance of the sinner.

This is another paradox created by divine love. On the one hand, God's love is such that he will accomplish redemption for us whether we cooperate or not. On the other hand, the person whose sinful behavior serves God's plan—this person too is loved by God. Were God not to require repentance, the person would be lost in his sin. By requiring repentance, God is calling the offender back to himself. We will look at how this pertains to Judas when we get further along in the story.

There is one reference to the fact that a meal is being celebrated. Jesus identifies the one who will betray him as the one who ate his bread. Also identified here is the "beloved disciple." There will be numerous references to this person in the rest of the gospel. Many have assumed this to be John. This, however, is never made clear. Perhaps the reference is to suggest an "ideal" disciple—one who is perfectly devoted to Jesus.

Several important discourses of Jesus follow this scene. The first is Jesus giving what he calls a "new commandment." This is the command that forms the basis of all others and, in fact, is descriptive of the relationships between Jesus and his disciples. What binds the disciples together in a redemptive relationship is love. Jesus is the embodiment of divine love and therefore brings the power of that love into their lives. When they receive him, they receive the love of God.

With the love of God dwelling in their hearts, they in turn are transformed and freed to love in return, not with the love of their own hearts, but with the divine love that dwells within them. This being the case, their identity as Jesus' disciples is confirmed by the love they share with each other. In other words, the presence of Jesus' love in their relationship confirms to others that they are his disciples.

Jesus then indicates that it is time for his glorification—his presentation or manifestation as the savior of the world. Cross, and resurrection, and exaltation—all part of the glorification because all together accomplish salvation.

Moreover, since this means he is returning to the Father, he tells them that where he is going, they cannot come. Peter again does not understand. He is thinking not in spiritual terms but literally. "Why can't we go with you?" "Later you will," Jesus affirms, after which Peter pledges to lay down his life for Jesus. He does not yet even understand himself. He is thinking in terms of what he wants to do for Jesus. Jesus at this point tells him he will deny even knowing him.

Chapter 14 begins with Jesus giving answers--what he will do that results in salvation for them. Everything is an act of God's grace in Christ. He goes ahead of us. He prepares a place for us, so that where we can't go now, we will later because of what he does for us. God does everything in this business of salvation. We simply receive what he gives through faith.

Thomas asks the way to where he is going. Jesus responds with another "I am" statement. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In him, God is present for us. He is the way to God. He brings God to us and so he is the truth. In God is life, and so he gives life to us. It is our intimate relationship with Jesus that reconnects us to God and thus, to life.

Philip, like the Pharisees, asks a question that indicates his inability to see God in Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see God. God reveals himself in a human person because he is bringing himself to human persons. He is reconciling himself, revealing himself, becoming real and actual for us in Jesus. God is a person we live in. Jesus brings heaven to earth and thereby salvation to humans who, while separate from God, are without divine love and life.

Jesus ends by speaking of the relation of works to faith. Through faith, Jesus lives in us, and we are empowered to continue his work in what we do. Faith is not the absence of works. It leads to works.

How does all this happen? How does Jesus bring God to us so that he lives in us through faith? This is the transformation of the believer, and it happens through the gift of the Spirit.

Our Bible studies in the coming weeks:

The rest of the chapters prepare disciples for Jesus' arrest and passion—what it means and how it will affect them.