

D. Assuring the Disciples (14:1-31)

Jesus' interchange with Peter exposed the disciples' confusion and anxiety. They struggled to process the things He was telling them, but they must have realized that everything they'd known in their relationship with Him was about to change. Peter presented a strong and resolute front, but he had to have been just as troubled as the others. These men had some sense of what lay ahead, but the trauma would exceed anything they could imagine. Shock, horror and paralyzing fear awaited them along with distress and discouragement sufficient to push them to the point of despondency. Jesus knew what was about to befall them and the same love that motivated Him to warn them led Him to temper His warning with words of comfort and reassurance.

This is a familiar passage, but a challenging one. First of all, the text itself is marked by variant readings and grammatical ambiguities. But there are other interpretive hurdles, one of which is the very fact of its familiarity. When a context is well-known and commonly cited, the tendency is toward a widely-accepted, even unquestioned interpretation. Meaning is assumed and the reader no longer looks at the text with careful, inquisitive eyes. So it is with this passage.

1. Jesus' words left His disciples perplexed and anxious, but their distress had only just begun. If their hearts were troubled as they reclined in the Upper Room, it was only going to get worse. Jesus could see their distress and He knew that the events about to transpire would press them to the verge of despair. He could not remove the agonizing trial coming upon them; indeed, it was just as necessary that they go through it as that He do so. But He would not have them overcome by it; they needed to face this trial in *faith* and, in that way, find relief for their troubled hearts (14:1-4).
 - a. Thus Jesus began His consolation with an exhortation recognizing the disciples' distress: "*Stop letting your hearts be troubled.*" He knew they were struggling with the things they were hearing and He wanted to set their hearts at ease. Their world was about to be turned upside down and everything they believed was going to be dismantled and refashioned. Their past experiences and expectations for the future could not afford them comfort or peace; *faith* was the sole remedy for their distress – faith directed toward both the Father and His Son (14:1).

The general thrust of Jesus' words is evident, but His exact meaning is less transparent. For John's grammar allows both verbs ("believe") to function as either indicatives or imperatives. Here, then, are the possibilities:

- 1) "*Believe in God, believe also in Me.*" (both verbs treated as imperatives)
- 2) "*You believe in God, believe also in Me.*" (first verb treated as indicative, second verb as imperative)
- 3) "*You believe in God and also believe in Me.*" (both verbs indicative)
- 4) "*Believe in God even as you believe in Me.*" (first verb treated as imperative, second verb as indicative)

It's impossible to know for certain which meaning John intended, but the context seems to argue for either the first or fourth option. Note in particular verse 14:7 which has two likely readings: "*If you have come to know Me – and you have, you shall also know My Father*" or "*If you had come to know Me – but you haven't, you would also know My Father*" (cf. also 14:9-10, 18-20, 15:26, 16:25-33, 17:6-8, 25-26). The first reading expresses a promise to the disciples while the latter is a rebuke of their unbelief. Both readings are widely represented in the manuscript evidence and scholars are divided as to which is the original.

Whatever the correct reading, Jesus' point is not in doubt: *The remedy for the disciples' distress was to trust Him and the One who sent Him*. Jesus was here speaking in reference to what was about to transpire, but as it concerned them, not Him. His concern was their well-being and steadfastness, not only through the trials of the next few days, but into the future as they fulfilled their commission to be His witnesses and interpreters, first to the people of Israel and then to the Gentile world (cf. 15:18-16:5, 17:14-20).

Thus Jesus' exhortation to faith was very specific; He wasn't calling them to "saving faith" ("believe that I'm about to die for your sins") or a general acknowledgment of and confidence in God, but to trust that the traumatic things they were about to experience were the outworking of God's good purpose in the One He'd sent. Their Lord's coming desolation and death was neither a tragic misfortune nor His defeat. Quite the opposite, it constituted God's complete victory – the triumph of deliverance, cleansing and renewal He'd been promising all along. What would appear to them to be the demise of their messianic hopes would actually be their realization. Their beloved Messiah's brutal death was going to bear the fruit of life, reconciliation, liberation and ingathering.

- b. The apostles needed to trust their Lord and the One who'd sent Him; they needed to turn aside from their uncertainty and fear and fix their gaze on the God behind their circumstances. And this God they were to trust is the God who'd sent Jesus as His promised Servant-Messiah; He is the *God of Israel* who'd made a covenant with Abraham on behalf of the world and then demonstrated His unwavering commitment to it over two millennia. Now the time had come to fulfill His covenant pledge to make Abraham the father of many nations and gather those children to Himself (Genesis 17:1-7). *Jesus' exhortation to faith was a call to trust the God who'd promised and shown Himself faithful by sending the Messiah – the One who was now assuring them that His departure was going to secure their place in His Father's house as true children of Abraham* (14:2-3).

These observations are fundamentally important to interpreting Jesus' imagery of His Father's *house* and its many *dwelling places* and how those images pertained to His apostles. Many Christians believe Jesus was talking about His impending departure into heaven and His intent to prepare a dwelling place there for His followers. From this vantage point, He was reassuring His troubled apostles that they had a place with Him and His Father in heaven when they died.

But a careful reading of the entire statement shows that Jesus was speaking about a reunion with Him *when He returned*; the issue wasn't the apostles rejoining their Lord in heaven, but Him returning to them and so gathering them to Himself. (Some commentators try to resolve this quandary by arguing that Jesus' "return" to "receive" His own amounts to His retrieval of the souls of His saints at their death in order to escort them to heaven and their abode in His Father's house, but neither John's language nor the larger context supports this interpretation.) Verse 3 is critically important for interpreting verse 2, but both must be treated within John's overall account and the scriptural salvation history it interacts with.

Jesus was returning to His Father for the purpose of preparing a place for His disciples in His Father's house. But they were to take possession of that *heavenly dwelling* by His return to them – not to take them to heaven, but to be with them on the *earth*. Moreover, their enduring life in the *Father's house* was somehow tied to the *Son* gathering them to Himself in an everlasting bond. *To be joined with the Son is to dwell with the Father in His house.*

In John's gospel, God's "house" is a reference, not to heaven, but to His *sanctuary* (ref. 2:14-16; cf. also Psalm 5:7, 23:6, 26:8, 27:4, 42:4; Micah 4:1-2; Haggai 1:1-2:9; Zechariah 1:16; Luke 6:1-4). So dwelling in God's house is dwelling with *Him*, and Yahweh promised this inheritance to the faithful among His people (ref. Psalm 52:7-8, 65:4, 84:1-4, 92:12-13). But the Scriptures also importantly associate men's place in Yahweh's house with the work of His messianic Servant. Isaiah, in particular, directly correlated presence in Yahweh's dwelling place with Messiah's ingathering – an ingathering embracing the nations as well as the children of Israel (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4 with 11:1-13, cf. also 49:1-13 with 51:14-52:15 and 53:1-12 with 54:1-17; ref. also Zechariah 2-3, 6:9-15).

So John previously emphasized that Jesus is the embodiment of Yahweh's sanctuary (1:14, 2:13-21, 4:19-26) and also both the door of the sheep (10:7-9) and the source and substance of their life (6:53-58). He is the One through whom men come to His Father (14:6) and He grants this entrance by means of His self-giving sacrifice (6:51, 12:27-33). John carefully crafted his account with the goal of enabling his readers to understand the meaning, purpose and effect of Jesus' person and work. So he recorded this final, climactic discourse believing that his readers would interpret it through the lens he'd so precisely ground for them:

Jesus' disciples were deeply distressed that He was leaving them, but they needed to know that He was departing (through death) in order to prepare a place for them in His Father's "house" – that is, the sanctuary He Himself embodied and which He was going to bring them into by gathering them to Himself. And not these eleven apostles only, but all who would come to believe through their foundational witness (ref. 12:32, 17:20; cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:4-10). And this entrance into His Father's sanctuary – this receiving unto Himself for which His departure would make preparation – was going to take place when He returned in His Spirit (14:16-18, 20:11-22; cf. Acts 1:1-8).

This interpretation is reinforced by 14:23 which contains the only other New Testament occurrence of the Greek term rendered “dwelling place.” There it refers to the *human* abode which Jesus promised He and His Father were going to inhabit together by the indwelling Spirit (ref. 14:16-23; cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19-20; Ephesians 2:11-22; ref. also Romans 8:9-11).

This reading associates the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise with His sending of the Spirit at *Pentecost*. The other option is to situate this return and ingathering at the *Parousia*. Jesus’ statement about “coming again” points most readily in this direction, but very shortly He would tell His disciples that He was going to return in the person of His Spirit (ref. again 14:16-18; cf. also 16:12-16). Indeed, it’s not necessary to choose one option or the other, for each implies the other:

- Jesus’ Parousia doesn’t represent His return from going away, but His *visible manifestation*. In the person of His Spirit, Jesus has remained with His people (Matthew 28:18ff; Revelation 1:10-20), but by sharing His life with them as they are taken up in Him. Pentecost is thus the premise and basis for the Parousia and its ingathering (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:14-17 with 15:20-23; Philippians 1:6 with 3:20-21; Colossians 1:24-27 with 3:1-4).
 - Conversely, Jesus’ return to His disciples in the person of His Spirit has its goal and full realization in His Parousia. For Jesus’ presence with His people is characterized by the union of their persons with His person. That union is now an inward reality, but it anticipates and promises the fullness of person-to-person union and communion in the resurrection of the body. At the Parousia, Jesus’ Pentecostal return to receive His disciples will obtain its consummate fruition (cf. Romans 8:9-11, 18-27; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
- c. Jesus’ assertion in verse 4, especially considered alongside His answer to Thomas, supports the interpretation presented here. Thomas’ question (14:5) points to the disciples’ bewilderment at Jesus’ statements about departing and returning to them. They didn’t understand what He was talking about (note John’s use of the plural pronoun in verse 5; cf. also 13:36), but Jesus reminded them that they *should* have; He wasn’t speaking cryptically of esoteric mysteries, but of matters He’d already disclosed to them: “*You have known the way where I am going.*” That is, He had instructed them concerning His Father’s purpose in sending Him, the general scheme for accomplishing that purpose and how it implicated them, Israel and the world. All four of the gospel records bear this out. However imprecise or incomplete their insight, these closest associates should have grasped Jesus’ general meaning when He spoke of departing, preparing a place and returning. They should have understood that He wasn’t going away to a physical location and that their future entrance into His Father’s house involved, not a journey to a destination, but a vital, living connection with Him: *He* is the way to the Father, but also the dwelling place He was preparing for them. And He is both precisely because He is *truth* and *life*.