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John O. York
john.york@lipscomb.edu

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“Until He Comes”

John’s Vision of Life Between Resurrection and Parousia (John 14:1-31)

by
John O. York

“In my father’s house are many mansions...” (John 14:2a, KJV).

On a number of occasions I have been asked to read the above words at funerals, as words of comfort to the family. More than once the family has asked that I be sure to read from the King James Version because it got the words right! The word in question for most people is “mansions.” Regardless of our economic status today, we find much more comfort in the thought that Jesus went away to prepare a “mansion” rather than a “room” for us. Perhaps the language of the familiar song contributes to this perspective; “I’ve got a room just over the hilltop, in that bright land where we never grow old” does not offer much hope to people accustomed to the vision of mansions. Unfortunately, the great power of this text has been lost precisely because of our visual image of a building rather than a relationship. Our placement of these words in the context of funerals has made them a message of hope about the afterlife, but in so doing we have taken them out of the context of life lived in the present. Yet, when Jesus spoke these words to his disciples they were clearly intended as a word of hope to those still alive on earth. The rest of chapter fourteen, and for that matter the rest of the last discourse (chapters 14-17) is not about life after death, but life before death—or even life without death.

Perhaps we are more comfortable talking

about mansions over the hilltop because much of the rest of the last discourse appears not to be addressed to us at all. It is private conversation between Jesus and his disciples. “Many mansions” must mean more than twelve, so that applies to us. “I do not pray for these alone but also for those who believe in me through their word” (17:20) must include us. Most of the material in between we are not too sure about. “This I command you, that you love one another” (15:17) works, but “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (16:13) is suspect—probably just meant for the apostles.

Our picking and choosing from these four chapters—or five chapters if we include the entire “upper room” scene, chapters 13-17—leaves us with a collection of one-liners that we can apply to various contexts like funerals; but we never hear what John was trying to communicate to his audience. We also have no consistency in our interpretation and application of the text. If we first ask how John intended this private conversation between Jesus and the apostles to be heard by his public, Christian audience, however, we can develop a more consistent reading of the whole.

Various commentators have offered theories on the immediate circumstances of John’s audience that prompted this gospel account. Whether it is the occasion of impending persecution from government authorities, or the Christians’ recent expulsion from the synagogue, or some other reason, John is writing

to a first-century Christian audience that needs to hold on to the conviction that “Jesus is the Christ” (20:30-31). John writes words of counsel and encouragement in the face of an extended time on earth without the return of the Messiah (*parousia*). In the face of persecution, even death, and the loss of hope in the imminent return of the resurrected Christ, the private conversation of Jesus and his disciples becomes a discourse on eternal life lived now. John does not have a second volume to write about life in the church, such as Luke provided his audience; but he does have teaching from Jesus which describes what Christian existence is to be until the exalted Christ comes again. From John’s perspective, Jesus himself described how Christians should live when the physical body of Jesus was taken up and Jesus was glorified with the Father. By giving this material public access through his gospel account, John transforms it into instruction for the church, not just private instruction to the disciples. John clearly intends for this material to instruct his audience on how they should live. More than instructing them on how they should live, he reminds them of who has empowered their lives, and why they already have eternal life now, while still awaiting that final “abiding place” with God.

Much of the material in these four chapters is repetitive, and various theories have been suggested in the commentaries for that repetition. Gordon Fee (*Interpretation* 43/2, 171) provides a nice summary of the repeated themes: Jesus is leaving (13:1, 31-33, 36; 14:1-4, 18, 25, 27-29; 16:5, 11-19, 28; 17:11); the apostles are staying (to continue his work and thus also be hated by the world; 13:13-17, 20, 34-35; 14:12-14, 18-21; 15:1-21, 27; 16:1-4, 23-24; 17:12-22); but they cannot go it alone, hence the gift of the *Paraclete* (14:15-18, 26; 15:26-27; 16:6-11, 13-14). Taking just the first part of what appears to be a four-part presentation (14:1-31; 15:1-16:4a; 16:4b-33; 17:1-26), we can get an overview of the message and see these themes being woven together.

Jesus Is Leaving (14:1-11)

In the context of chapter thirteen, Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet and given them commands to wash one another’s feet and to love one another (13:13, 34). The commandment to love one another followed Jesus’ reminder that he had little time left with them, and “where I am going, you cannot come” (13:33). When Peter protested, first asking where Jesus was going, then wanting to know why he could not follow—even to the point of offering to die with Jesus—Jesus predicted Peter’s three-fold denial. It is Peter’s concern (no doubt shared by the other disciples) over the location of Jesus when they are not

allowed to follow that leads to the words, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in me, believe also in the one who sent me. In my Father’s house are many rooms (*monai*).” The word used by Jesus is found again in verse 23 (“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our *home* (*monen*) with him”). More importantly, this term is the noun form of the verb translated “abide” in 15:4-9, when Jesus describes his intimate relationship with the Father. The point of the saying is not about palatial dwellings in the afterlife, but about the intimacy of relationship that will be shared with the Father in those “abiding places” Jesus is going away to prepare.

John clearly understands that there will be eternal habitations with the Father, and that Jesus, in his glorification, is returning to the Father to make those preparations. Jesus will come again (v 3) and “take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” The way he is going (v 4) refers to his death; but his expectation that the disciples know the way leads to Thomas’ question, “We don’t know the direction; how can we know the way?” Jesus responds with another of his “I AM” plus predicate statements (cf. 6:35, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 15:1, 2): “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). Since the question at issue is “the way,” “truth” and “life,”—two qualities already attributed to Jesus on several other occasions (for “truth” see 1:14, 17; 8:32, 40-46; for “life” see 1:4, 6:35, 51; 10:10; 11:25)—are to be heard as qualifying how Jesus is “the way.” The direction Jesus is going (his glorification at the Cross) becomes the means by which the disciples have access to the Father. The way Jesus is going is transformed into Jesus being the way of intimate relationship with the Father.

When Philip sounds all too modern with his “show me” attitude (“Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”), Jesus remonstrates, “Have I been with you all this long and you, Philip, don’t you know me? The one who has seen me has seen the Father!” The words that follow (vv 10-11) emphasize Jesus’ unity with the Father, reminding the disciples (and John’s audience) that the words and works of Jesus are the words and works of God. The essential character of God has been revealed in the Son. That has been John’s message to his audience from the opening sentence of the prologue (1:1); no one has ever seen God, but the only Son has dwelt among us and made him known (1:14, 18).

Staying to Continue his Work

With Jesus’ departure now at hand, Jesus moves from the relationship he shares with his Father—a relationship about to be fully restored—to

the purpose of the disciples' activity in his absence. Jesus' return to the Father actually means more activity, not less. The one who believes in Jesus (i.e., that, in fact, his words and deeds are those of God himself (vv 9-11) will do "greater works than these." The deeds and words that revealed the relationship of the earthly Jesus to God the Father will now be manifest in even greater quantity, in spite of the physical absence of Jesus, in and through the presence of those who believe. The physical limitations of one earthly body (Jesus) now will give way to the multiple activity of the disciples who will reach "other sheep" (10:16), "those who believe through their word"

(17:20). Moreover, Jesus himself, though gone to be with the Father, will continue to work (v 13). The greater works will be done "in my name" through prayer. Commentators speak of the way divine names were invoked in the ancient world to produce magical results. This is no invitation to magic or a credit card that satisfies every selfish desire. Asking "in my name" assumes that what Jesus said and did on earth is to be continued through the prayerful efforts of his followers. "Whatever you ask" will be done whenever it glorifies the Father and makes him known in ways that create faith.

Doing the works of Jesus through prayer assumes a relationship with Jesus that manifests love and obedience to him (v 15). To those in such a relationship, the hole left by the absence of the physical Jesus will be filled by "another *Paraclete*" (counselor, advocate, comforter). The language of "another *Paraclete*" suggests continuity of function between the "Spirit of truth" (v 17) and the historical Jesus. Unlike the physical Jesus, the Spirit remains forever, and will dwell ("abide") with and in the disciples—a permanent presence of God in the believers until Jesus returns to claim his own. The disciples' struggle, the tension of not seeing and knowing even in the presence of Jesus (14:8ff.), will be the plight of the world with regard to the Spirit. But the Spirit "abides" (see 15:4-9) with and in (v 17) those doing "greater works than these."

The ambivalent nature of the relationship between Jesus (who is Way, Truth, Life) and another *Paraclete* (who is the Spirit of Truth), is magnified by the verses that follow (vv 18-24). The departure of Jesus, and his not so imminent return (from the perspective of John's audience), does not mean wasted

efforts by those who believe. There is more than one way to speak of his coming. While the world won't see Jesus (just as it cannot see the Spirit), the disciples will see him. Is this talk about the **parousia**, or the divine presence of Father and Son through the Spirit, or both? The intimate relationship of Father to Son and Son to disciples is what Jesus goes on to discuss,

suggesting a both/and or now/not yet answer to the question of relationship. While the disciples remain on earth they are to manifest their relationship of love to the Son through their relationship of love to one another. The question of knowing and being known, of being manifest to the world or to the

disciples (v 22) is addressed in the way the disciples love God and the Son by keeping the commandments ("love one another" is the only commandment given in the context; loving God and loving the Son obviously function as commands, as does the phrase "believe in me"). The Father loves those who love and obey the Son and keep his word. More than that, rather than the believer waiting for the time when he/she goes to the Father and the Son, the Father and Son come to the believer and make their "abiding place" with him/her (cf. 14:2).

Between Resurrection and Parousia

Verses 25 and following serve as a summation of the first part of the discourse. Jesus has spoken these words before his departure, but when the Father sends the *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, the disciples will receive full instruction and be reminded of these words of Jesus. The opening words, "Let not your hearts be troubled" (14:1) are repeated in the context of the peace that Jesus says he is leaving with them (v 27). Likewise there is the reminder that, although he is going away now, he will come again (v 28; cf. 14:3). All that is about to take place is the will of the Father, not the will of the ruler of this world (vv. 30-31). The disciples are to respond in faith, not dejection or even denial (as was the case with Judas Iscariot, 13:21-30). His going away is not to be interpreted as loss but as gain, as a time for rejoicing. Absence means greater presence. Glorification of the Son means empowerment for the disciples. Empowerment by prayer in his name will be accompanied by even greater presence and empowerment through another *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, through whom both Father and Son will make their "abiding place"

While the disciples remain on earth they are to manifest their relationship of love to the Son through their relationship of love to one another.

(14:17, 23).

John's application of these words of Jesus to his own audience some two generations removed from that scene in the upper room, suggests that, although we are now 2000 years removed, the application remains valid today. We still live between resurrection and **parousia**. We still have the same questions of faith, those "show me" demands that faith cannot provide. We still need to hear that, in the absence of physical presence, there is an even greater spiritual presence that abides in us and provides a "knowing" that can never be achieved with "show me." We still can believe in him, and keep his commandment to love one another. While we wait for the Son to come again, while we wait for our "abiding place" with him in eternity, we can know that the

Father and the Son have come to us, making their "abiding place" with us through the Holy Spirit. The intimate relationship that will be ours when the Christ comes to take us to himself in his Father's house is to be ours now as well. The work that Jesus did then, he still does today, through those who share in that relationship and prayer "in his name." We invoke the name of Jesus in prayer, not as a "sincerely yours" closing but as an empowering declaration of faith. Jesus is still working "greater works than these" in our midst, and will continue to do so until he comes again to take us to himself.

John York is preaching minister of the Brentwood Hills Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee.