

“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”

The Forty-Fifth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 14:1-14; Exodus 26:26-37

As the Upper Room discourse continues to unfold in John 14, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away, and that he will prepare a place for them. The disciples are confused by Jesus' words, and several of them have questions for Jesus. Thomas wants to know the way to the place which Jesus is preparing for them in his Father's house, while Philip wants Jesus to show the remaining disciples the glory of the Father. In answering Thomas' and Philip's questions, Jesus utters some of the best known and most profound statements in all the New Testament. For nearly three years, the disciples have traveled with Jesus, witnessed countless miracles, and heard Jesus say things which nice Jewish boys do not say, unless he is God incarnate. In their last evening together, Jesus reveals much new information about the nature of his messianic mission (which is about to end), but he also speaks about the disciples' future ministry (which is about to begin).

When we left off last time (the closing verses of chapter 13), Jesus is with his disciples in a rented upper room in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover. It is early Thursday evening—the Passover began at sundown. With the joy of Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday quickly fading because of the gravity of the Passover celebration, the disciples surely sensed that this Passover was going to be different from anything they had ever experienced with Jesus before. Jesus is troubled, and is speaking like a man about to die.

The reason for the somber nature of the evening is that Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure—he will suffer and die upon a Roman cross the next afternoon, and after being raised from the dead, Jesus will ascend into heaven and return to his Father. Because his long anticipated hour has come, Jesus must now explain to his disciples that he is about to leave them, as well as explain to them why. The disciples stand at the brink of a new age in redemptive history, and in order to understand what is soon to come later that evening and next afternoon, Jesus must teach them about the nature of his messianic mission, explain why it has come to an end, why he must now leave them, and why his departure will be better for them. To do this, Jesus will explain to them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Understandably, his disciples are struggling to understand the significance of Jesus' words, and it is only in hindsight that the things Jesus tells them during this discourse will finally make sense to them.

Although Jesus is their teacher and Lord, soon after sundown Jesus opened the Passover celebration by washing the feet of his disciples—something never done for servants in the ancient world by someone of Jesus' authority, since it is the disciples who ordinarily would be washing Jesus' feet. Jesus told them how this washing with water pointed ahead to a spiritual washing—a washing with the blood he was about to shed for his people upon the cross as Israel's true and spotless Passover lamb.

But there were other difficult revelations to be made as well. Jesus announced to the twelve that one of them (Judas) would betray him, and that another of them (the leader of the group, and the most exuberant of them all, Peter) would deny evening knowing Jesus. In fact, Peter would do so three times before the rooster crowed (i.e., at first light the next morning). Peter was brave and loyal and could not begin to understand how he would come to do such a thing. The news of a satanically-inspired defection by the group's treasurer (Judas) was also difficult to understand, so much so that even when Jesus identified Judas as his betrayer when he handed him a piece of bread dipped in sop, the disciples could not get their

minds around such an act until Judas showed up with an armed mob later that evening bent upon arresting Jesus so that he might be put to death. Judas had been with them from the beginning, and although they figured out later on that Judas was a thief and a liar, on this night the eleven remaining disciples simply could not understand how one of their own could do such a thing.

When he heard Jesus' prediction, Peter, of course, protested that he would defend Jesus to the death, not at all knowing what would transpire later that same evening, when Jesus stands trial before Caiaphas (the Jewish high priest and leader of the Sanhedrin) and Pilate (the Roman governor). When it became clear to Peter that he might suffer the same fate as Jesus (death by crucifixion) Peter went weak in the knees, lost his courage, and did exactly what Jesus told him he would do—three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Both of these predictions were shocking to the twelve, and the disciples' confusion and refusal to accept these predictions reveal how difficult for them Jesus' words truly were. But Jesus has much to teach them and little time left to do so. Understanding will come later.

Then, in verses 34-35 of chapter 13, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment, along with an exhortation—*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Jesus' words are a restatement of similar commandments in the Old Testament, as in Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5. What made these words from Jesus so compelling is that Jesus speaks as though he is the author of God's commandments, and that he alone has the authority to reinterpret the law of God given through the prophet Moses, in the greater light of his own messianic mission. This means that Jesus is that great prophet foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15, and that what Jesus is about to tell them in the balance of the discourse comes with the authority of YHWH. The point of this new commandment is that the love these men are to have for each other will serve as compelling evidence to unbelievers that these men are Jesus' disciples, and that he is their Lord.

This brings us to our text, John 14:1-14, one of the best known sections in all the gospels. These verses are well-known because Jesus makes several statements which speak to the nature of heaven, his own divine identity, his role as the only Savior from human sin, and his promise to answer the prayers of his people, once he departs from the disciples and returns to the Father now that his messianic mission has reached its conclusion. As we will see in this and in coming sermons, Jesus' absence from the disciples is a major theological dilemma which Jesus will address, and answer later on in the discourse. The essence of this dilemma is this—just when Jesus' messianic mission comes to its conclusion, and just when you would expect history to end with Jesus' bodily resurrection, Jesus then unexpectedly ascends into heaven, leaving his people on earth to continue on without his physical presence. How those who believe in Jesus are to relate to a risen and ascended Lord will be the focus of much of the Upper Room Discourse, when Jesus explains the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

After having spoken openly of his coming death and resurrection in the days preceding his entrance into Jerusalem, and after informing his disciples that Judas would betray him and that Peter would deny him, Jesus now comforts his disciples with a series of remarkable promises. Jesus has spoken difficult words to them, and he can tell that they are growing troubled by his predictions, as well as by his own obvious personal anguish. In John 12:27, Jesus told them that he was troubled in heart, and in John 13:21, John informs us that Jesus was troubled in spirit. Jesus knows what is to come, and he seems to be greatly troubled by the things about which he has been speaking. The disciples do not yet know what is coming, but must have observed Jesus' anguish—especially so, after he told them of it.

In John 14:1, we read that Jesus exhorts the eleven, *“let not your hearts be troubled.”* In light of the

great uncertainty about an unknown future, Jesus assures them that things will turn out far better than they can ever imagine. But the good-ending will only come about after a series of gut-wrenching events which will take them to moments of great despair, produce a number of surprising plot twists completely beyond their expectations, and he will soon grant them a joy they cannot yet begin to comprehend. But Jesus' words "*let not your hearts be troubled*" amount to nothing but a Hallmark-like platitude unless there is a reason why they should not be troubled on this, their last evening with Jesus.

And so, Jesus exhorts them bluntly, "*believe in God; believe also in me.*" To believe in God (in the biblical sense), means to trust in God. That is, the disciples must trust that God will some how, and in some way, deliver them through the mysterious and difficult events of which Jesus has been speaking (his betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension). The disciples are not trust in themselves, but in God. But Jesus adds, to trust in God, is to trust in him. The eleven must look to Jesus, who has already claimed to speak the words of God (John 5:19ff.) to deliver them from what is to come.

Notice that Jesus does not direct them to look within themselves to see if they are up to the challenge. "How much faith do you have?" "How much faith can you muster?" "Do you *feel* like everything will turn out alright." No, Jesus recommends none of the things typical of modern American religion, which is self-centered and entirely subjective ("look within," "how do you feel about things?"). Instead, Jesus directs them *not* to look inside themselves, but to trust that God will keep his promises made to them through Jesus, despite appearances to the contrary. This is what the word "believe" means throughout the New Testament. It is not the presence of faith, or "feelings" of faithfulness, but the object of faith which matters. Says Jesus, "to trust in God is to trust in me." So, despite whatever happens, Jesus is telling them (and us), "look to God to deliver you, by trusting that what I am telling you is true." This is how we keep our hearts from being troubled in times of distress and uncertainty—we look to the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and we believe his word to be true, and that his promises are for us.

Jesus now speaks directly about his departure from his disciples. In verse 2, Jesus tells them, "*in my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*" One of the reasons Jesus must leave them is so that he can prepare a place for his people, who will be following him. This was a tough saying for them to comprehend, no doubt, because Jesus had recently told them that where he was going they could not come. He now explains this to them.

The place which he will prepare is a dwelling in his Jesus' Father's house. Great mischief has been done with this verse. The Greek word *monē* refers to a dwelling place (a place where someone lives). Unfortunately, the Greek word was translated in the Latin Vulgate as "mansiones" and then in the KJV as "mansions." The idea in the Greek text is that in the Father's dwelling (i.e. "heaven") there are many dwelling places, or "rooms." In other words, there is room for everyone in the Father's dwelling. There is no focus whatsoever on the lavishness and opulence of the dwelling places, only that they are within the Father's dwelling. The blessing Jesus promises us then, is that he is preparing a place for us in heaven in the presence of God the Father.¹ This is why, in part, Jesus is leaving—to prepare such a place for the disciples (and for us).

Often times, this meaning of this verse is completely distorted through a modern materialistic emphasis upon the lavishness of the heavenly accommodations. The usual application is that the better you do in the Christian life, the bigger (or more lavish) will be your mansion in heaven. But there is nothing in this

¹ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 488-489.

verse which remotely suggests such a thing, and Jesus does not connect this to the Christian life (i.e., “what we do for Jesus” will earn us a bigger or better mansion). Rather, the point is what Jesus does *for* his disciples—he goes and prepares a place for us. Jesus is telling us that there is room in the presence of God for all those who believe in him, which is why the disciples are to not be troubled. God is not going to leave them out, or alone! Where Jesus is going, they cannot come *now*. But Jesus is preparing a place for them to which one day he will take them. This, of course, what we commonly speak of as heaven.

Jesus explains in verse 3 that, “*and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*” The bad news (which the disciples were having trouble accepting) is that Jesus is going away and leaving them. The good news is that he is going to prepare a place for them, and that one day he will come back to them, and take them to be where he is. The language is straight forward, but the meaning of Jesus’ declaration is a bit complicated.

When Jesus speaks of coming again to them, this may refer to a number of things. For one thing, Jesus will appear to them after his resurrection. Also, he will send them the Holy Spirit after he has returned to the glory of the Father, coming to them again through the indwelling Holy Spirit. This may even refer to the moment when a Christian dies, and then enters into the dwelling place (heaven) which Jesus has prepared for us. It may even refer to his second advent at the end of the age, when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Since the focus in the sentence falls upon Jesus preparing the place to which he will take the disciples, I understand Jesus to be referring to his second advent, although there is no reason why any of these things should be excluded. They all will occur.

Whatever the precise reference, the key point is that this is *why* Jesus is going away, and *why* the disciples cannot now join him. Jesus still has work yet to do—he must prepare a place for them. Despite their inability to fully grasp what Jesus will accomplish through his death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells them, “*and you know the way to where I am going.*” Upon hearing these words, Thomas wants more specific information about how to get to the place of which Jesus is speaking. In verse 5, Thomas asks Jesus, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?*” If Thomas doesn’t know where the place is, how can he know the way there? What place? Where is it? Thomas has missed Jesus’ point.

Jesus’ answer in verse 6 is one of the best known verses in all the Bible. “*Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’*” This verse is often quoted by Christians in an evangelistic context (Jesus identifies himself as the only way to heaven), or in a Christological context—Jesus identifies himself as one with YHWH, using the *ego emi* “I Am” formula. While this saying of Jesus does fit well in both contexts (and it is appropriate to use his words in this manner), neither context was the one in which Jesus spoke in the Upper Room. Jesus is answering a question put to him by Thomas, a skeptical man who wanted more information than Jesus had given him about the place which Jesus was preparing for them. Jesus’ answer is not to give Thomas additional directions (turn right and go three blocks), but rather to reveal more information about himself—“I Am the way” (to the Father’s dwelling place).

There are a number of loud echoes in Jesus’ words from the Old Testament which the disciples likely noticed. Many Jews of Jesus’ day believed the way to God was through obedience to the law (since the law was a revelation of the only true God’s holiness and demands). Those who obeyed the commandments accrued enough merit to enter God’s presence. Many Jews also understood that God was only present with his people in the Holy of holies, and that the curtain at the entrance to the most holy place separated God from all his sinful creatures (as in Exodus 26:33, our Old Testament lesson).

Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of holies, and only after sacrifices and elaborate preparations to remove his guilt and ensure ceremonial cleanliness. So, when Jesus tells the disciples that he is the only way to God, he is claiming that he is doing something none of Israel's priests could do. Jesus provides access for all of God's people to the holy God (his Father). This is why the moment Jesus dies upon the cross, the temple veil is torn from top to bottom. Jesus is declaring that he is the great high priest, and the true temple of God on earth, and that through him, all believers have access to God.

Jesus' answer also means that there is only one way to heaven—himself. No sinful human knows the way to heaven unless and until that way has been revealed to us by God. No humanly-devised religion, no religious rituals or ceremonies, no amount of good works, nor genuine sincerity, or good intentions can open the way to heaven. This is because of human sin. We are all barred from heaven, and banished from the presence of the Holy God, just as Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, symbolized by the veil which separated the Holy of holies from the rest of the temple. According to Jesus, the only way to heaven is through faith in his person. Jesus is the only way to God, because he is God's truth (incarnate) and the author of life (regeneration and the new birth). As the truth which God has revealed, and the source of all spiritual life, Jesus' person and work is the only way to God's dwelling (heaven). There is no other way, as Jesus makes plain.

Jesus is making an exclusive truth claim. God in human flesh is telling his disciples that he is the only way to the heavenly dwelling, and there is no other way to God (and salvation) other than himself, through his bloody cross and the empty tomb. So, it is Jesus, as God in human flesh, who teaches that Christianity is the only true religion, and that no other religion (or philosophical system, or religious sentiment, or human aspirations) leads to God. To say this in modern America is to commit the cardinal sin—"how dare you say that only Christians go to heaven!" But this is what Jesus himself states when answering Thomas' question. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Jesus knows full well that this truth claim will be the most difficult part of the Christian life, and that the world will hate us for even daring to repeat these words of Jesus. Yet, despite the hatred from the world, Jesus is our way to God's dwelling. He alone leads us to the Father.

In verse 7, Jesus goes on to say, *"if you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."* The conditional "if" here makes it tough to fully understand what Jesus means. Mostly likely the sense is that *if* the disciples truly understood who Jesus is, then they would know that to trust God, is to trust in him (Jesus), and vice-versa. But once Jesus has instructed them that he is the only way to God (and to heaven), *"from now on"* they do (or should) know that in the person of Jesus they have seen God. The disciples are beginning to understand, but have not yet figured out the full ramifications of Jesus's answer. Philip accepts Jesus' explanation, but still wants to see God with his own eyes (the "beatific vision"), not as proof of what Jesus has just told him, but to satisfy his curiosity. *"Philip said to [Jesus], 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.'"*

Jesus' talk of seeing and knowing God, triggers Philip's curiosity to see God as he is in himself. Curiosity about God's nature and essence is normal, and it is only because Jesus' divine glory is veiled by human flesh that Philip dares ask the question. Philip has forgotten that in Exodus 33:18, Moses asked YHWH a similar question, *"Please show me your glory."* The answer from YHWH to Moses (in verses 19-23 of Ex. 33), reveals just how dangerous such a desire to see God truly is. *"I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I*

will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” YHWH must protect his people from his glory. Jesus’ divine glory is hidden by human flesh. On day, the disciples will all see God in his glory, but cannot do so and live, until Jesus secures for them (and for us) the way to God’s dwelling, where his heavenly glory is present and we are able to appear in his presence.

Jesus’ answer to Philip (in verse 9) reveals our Lord’s sadness at the question, and lack of understanding it reveals. *“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”* Curiosity about the nature of God, and about heaven, is normal and not a bad thing. But for three years, Philip has lived in the presence of God in human flesh, and yet he is not satisfied with what has already been revealed to him. Philip has seen Jesus, therefore he has seen God. Now he wants to see God’s glory, but he has no clue what the sight of God’s glory entails—his immediate death. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ divine glory will be revealed in the death and resurrection of the suffering servant—a theology of the cross. But Philip still wants to see that from which (this side of death and heaven) we are forbidden from seeing (theology of glory). Philip still does not “get it.” He seeks a theology of glory, not a theology of the cross.

In verse 10, Jesus asks Philip (and the others) a direct question. *“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”* In other words, “Philip, do you believe in my incarnation?” “Do you believe that I am God in human flesh?” Jesus continues, *“the words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”* Jesus speaks the words of YHWH. He does the works of YHWH. In the next verse, he tells Philip: *“believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”* Jesus is not asking for Philip to make a blind leap in the dark (as some describe faith), but he is asking Philip to believe him based upon Jesus’ track record of performing miracles, keeping his promises, and speaking forth the word of God. Miracles do not create faith in unbelievers, but they serve as “signs” to confirm faith already in the hearts of believers. This is Jesus’ point here—believe based the signs which Jesus has already given him.

The reason why the disciples must believe the Father dwells in Jesus becomes clear in verses 12-14. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”* We will spend a great deal of time discussing the meaning of these verses in the coming weeks.

Sadly, Jesus’ words are often misinterpreted and distorted—especially by certain Pentecostals, faith-healers, and televangelists to mean that if only we have enough faith, then we can perform the kinds of miracles which Jesus did. If true, why doesn’t Benny Hinn put Forest Lawn out of business. I have yet to see a modern Lazarus appear on the set of TBN. Yet, Jesus is clear—his disciples will do greater works than he did. Why does he say this, and what does he mean?

The key in understanding what Jesus means is to consider that Jesus is leaving to prepare a place for them—he is ascending into heaven. His ascension sets in motion a series of events tied to a new era in redemptive history—the birth of the church and the new covenant era. Part of the preparation Jesus will make for his disciples is giving his church the gift of the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost, what Jesus means by “greater works” will become clear—but not until then. In fact, Jesus will explain this to them in verses 15-31 of this chapter, as well as in much of chapter 16, when he tells the disciples about the work of the Holy Spirit. Before his death, resurrection, and ascension, the meaning of Jesus’ works are somewhat

veiled, so that even his own disciples have trouble understanding what they mean.² After Pentecost, the greater works of which Jesus is speaking will become apparent when, on the day of Pentecost, 3,000 people become believers, are baptized, and filled with the Holy Spirit, when Peter preaches a sermon.

Because Jesus is going to the Father, and will not be with the disciples physically, the disciples' prayers are to be directed to the Father (or to Jesus) in the name of the son (Jesus). Although Jesus will not be physically present with his disciples, he will indwell them (through the Holy Spirit), and what they ask of God, they are to ask in Jesus' name. Although not physically present with us, Jesus hears our prayers and answers them—but not according to human whim as prosperity preachers teach (“I want a new Porsche”). Jesus will answer our prayers in his name according to God's will—things associated with the kingdom of God, which are tied to the greater works promised by Jesus. Jesus promises to grant those prayers which seek to advance his kingdom, not those prayers in which we seek selfish things.

When we ask anything in Jesus' name, and which is in accordance with his will, Jesus will answer such prayers because he has ascended into heaven and has prepared a place for us where his Father dwells (heaven). There is plenty of room for all of us! And we know the way there because, as Jesus tells us, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*”

² Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 496.