

THE  
FAREWELL DISCOURSE  
AND  
FINAL PRAYER  
OF JESUS

*AN EVANGELICAL EXPOSITION OF  
JOHN 14–17*

**D. A. CARSON**



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For David and Joyce Smith

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## PREFACE

**F**OR THE LAST EIGHT YEARS I have spent more time studying the Gospel of John than any other part of the Scripture. This has proved to be a lesson in humility. John is simple enough for a child to read and complex enough to tax the mental powers of the greatest minds. As one commentator has put it, this book is like a pool in which a child may wade and an elephant may swim. I am not an elephant; but I have become aware of the many places where I am beyond my depth.

Up to now, what I have written on this Gospel was prepared for the well-trained minister or serious student, and is available only in journals or in books not likely to be read by the general reader. I am more and more convinced, however, that those of us who by the grace of God have been privileged to spend much time studying the Scriptures owe the fruit of our labors not only to the scholarly community but also to the church at large. A need exists for both academic and popular approaches; but this volume belongs to the latter camp. It grew out of a series of addresses given at several conferences in Canada and the United States. These have been worked over and rewritten as essays, a form more congenial to the

## Preface

printed page than is a sermon; but I have purposely refrained from obliterating all traces of the earlier form.

It is common in the scholarly community to assert that the historical Jesus was responsible for very little of the teaching recorded in John 14–17. It will quickly become obvious that I am not so skeptical. With some hesitation I have refrained from adding an appendix to explain my approach to historical-critical questions (as I did in *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*, also published by Baker); and only rarely have I alluded to questions of authenticity in the course of the exposition. Those interested in knowing how I would approach such problems may read “Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some Methodological Questions,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 411–29, and “Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2, ed. D. Wenham (1981).

Renaë Grams and Karen Sich prepared the typescript with their characteristic accuracy, efficiency, and cheerfulness; and I am very grateful.

I pray that these short studies will be as spiritually profitable to those who read them as they have been to me as I prepared them. But above all, I pray that this volume will encourage many to return again and again to the Scriptures themselves. Whatever helps us better understand, obey, and believe the Word of God contributes to our eternal well-being; but the ultimate source of that well-being is God alone.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

D. A. Carson  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
Deerfield, Illinois  
February 1980

# 1

## Prologue

*John 13*

**T**HE ATMOSPHERE in the large upstairs room was tense, unhappy, uncertain.

The evening had gone badly from the start. The disciples had gathered with Jesus, as arranged, and climbed to the upstairs room where the food was already prepared. They looked around for the traditional servant to wash their feet; but seeing no one, and being too polite to mention it, they stretched out on their pallets around the low eating table without saying a word. Jesus offered the traditional prayer of thanksgiving; and then they noticed that Jesus was pushing himself off his pallet. The talk was stilled. The Master quietly took off his cloak. To their utter consternation, he went over to the washstand, wrapped the towel around his waist, picked up the large basin of water, and headed for the nearest disciple.

Teachers shouldn't do things like that. Not even equals should wash one another's feet: it is a job for servants—and the servants

with least seniority, at that. The first disciple, too surprised to move, too embarrassed to protest, felt his sandals being slipped off, and then the cool water and the dry towel. The Master proceeded to the second disciple, and to the third; all the while the silence was deafening.

Typically, it was Simon Peter who broke the silence. As Jesus approached to wash his feet, Peter curled up his legs and pointed out the inappropriateness of the Master's action with what he thought was a tactful question: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus straightened his back, looked him straight in the eye, and replied quietly, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

Peter's voice hardened; someone had to speak out. If the Master could not see that he was demeaning himself, Peter would have to tell him. "No," he said, "you will never wash my feet."

Still Jesus looked at him with that unwavering gaze. "Unless I wash you," he said, "you have no part with me."

Open confrontation. For a moment the still air was charged with suspense. Did Jesus not recognize that Peter was speaking out of love? But faced with a response like that, Peter was now slow in rising to the occasion. He decided to take advantage of the situation and declare his love in a different way, "Then, Lord," he replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well."

That might have relieved the tension; but then Jesus added something more, something that, at the time, was highly enigmatic and restored the gloomy foreboding in the room. He said, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And," he added, looking around the room, "you are clean, though not every one of you." And in the utter silence that followed, he finished washing their feet.

The disciples watched Jesus wipe his hands, don his cloak, and return to his pallet. Unable to look at each other, embarrassed both for themselves and for their Teacher, they were quietly grateful

that the episode was over. And then all of a sudden it was not; for Jesus began speaking again.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked.

They understood well enough; he had washed their feet. But then they began to see that he expected a deeper answer than that. What Jesus had done for them was to provide a model; and as this truth slowly dawned on them, drawn out by the quiet question, they found their groping answers confirmed as Jesus responded to his own question.

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’” he said, “and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

That was the first embarrassing episode of the evening. Jesus had talked on in vague terms about betrayal and other gloomy subjects; but at the time what he was saying did not seem too coherent. Conversation gradually resumed, and the feast began. Strangely, as the atmosphere improved, Jesus seemed to become more and more despondent, deeply troubled in spirit. Conversation drooped. Encouraged by the lull, Jesus spoke again, this time plainly.

“I tell you the truth,” he said, “one of you is going to betray me.”

The atmosphere instantly became stultifying again. The silence returned, an engulfing blanket, as the disciples stared at each other. This time there was no doubt what the Master meant. The only question was which disciple Jesus had in mind. The stares around the low table were mixed: some curious, some blank, some frightened. Eating came to a standstill.

In a burst of confused questions, several asked incredulously if the Lord had them in mind; and Judas Iscariot joined in their number.

Peter recovered first; but remembering how his last outburst earned him a rather sharp rebuke, he was loathe to plunge ahead with the obvious question. He caught John's eye and mouthed the question now gathering in everyone's mind. "Ask him which one he means," he mimed, nodding toward John who lay on the pallet next to Jesus.

John, leaning on his left arm, slowly twisted backward so that he could talk to Jesus. John's head fell back on Jesus's breast; and then John asked quietly, "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish."

Everyone stared at Jesus. No one spoke. Slowly Jesus dipped his bread in the dish, shook off the excess, and held the bread out to Judas Iscariot.

Now everyone stared at Judas. It did not seem possible that he could be a traitor. Had he not been with them from the beginning, preaching and performing miracles with the best of them? Had he not been trusted and respected enough to serve as treasurer? It was hard to believe that Judas could become a turncoat. When would this happen? Or was Jesus simply offering a warning, and hoping that a dangerous tendency could be nipped in the bud by a slicing thrust, by public exposure?

Still Jesus held out the bread to Judas. Judas felt the stares. Shamed and sullen, he said nothing while his racing mind searched out what he should do next. He had already made arrangements to betray Jesus; and now he had to come to a final decision. He had found the foot-washing episode so humiliating, so unfitting for any would-be Messiah, that he had found his decision to betray Jesus greatly reinforced. And now this! The temerity of this Jesus! But what was Jesus up to? Was he warning him? Or pleading with him to refuse to take the bread? Or calling his bluff? Or trying to shame him out of it? Just look at the stunned and stupid stares of these people—they can't seem to recognize that their vitality

and independence are being emasculated by this Teacher who is curiously captivating yet too meek and too weak to provide the leadership the nation needs.

Firmly, decisively, Judas reached out and took the dipped bread. The challenge was accepted, or the bluff called. Judas crossed some personal Rubicon, and Satan took hold of him.

Then Jesus spoke again, addressing Judas directly: “What you are about to do, do quickly.” Judas answered with stony silence; but he pushed himself off his pallet and slowly rose to his feet. The others looked on, stunned, uncertain. It did not occur to them that Jesus was actually telling Judas to get on with the betrayal, to betray him quickly: for what sane man would say that? They could not imagine such a thing, because they still could not believe their Master was willingly and steadfastly taking all the steps that would lead to his own grim execution. Unable at this point to grasp the necessity of the cross in the plan of God, and Jesus’s voluntary submission to that plan, they had no mental category in which they could place Jesus’s comments, or by which they could make sense of Jesus’s charge to Judas. Perhaps, they speculated, Jesus was moving on to some new subject. Perhaps Jesus was satisfied with the warning he had given, and was now showing Judas that in some sense he still trusted him to discharge his responsibilities as treasurer. It really was not very clear.

Judas opened the door and walked out; and it was night. Not till much later would John remember that blackness through the open door, and judge it fitting. The true light that gives light to every man had come into the world (1:9); but those who do evil hate the light and will not come into the light for fear their deeds may be exposed (3:20). Jesus claimed to be the light of the world (9:5): how appropriate that the betrayer of the light should walk out into the darkness.

No sooner had Judas gone than Jesus began to speak to the remaining disciples of his own departure. He spoke somewhat

enigmatically in terms of being glorified, in terms of leaving them behind. He reminded them to love one another, and spoke consolingly about their future witness.

But most of what he said was puzzling. It was impressive in a way, and dramatic; but it was not very comprehensible. What the disciples did understand, and what alarmed them, was this talk of Jesus's departure. Finally Peter could take it no longer. He wanted plain answers to plain questions, and he wanted them now. He phrased his question bluntly, and asked it firmly: "Lord, where are you going?"

That was how the third embarrassing and distressing episode began that evening. Jesus would not be pushed; and he replied calmly but still enigmatically, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

Peter responded with another question: "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" Then, fearing that perhaps his own allegiance was being impugned, he protested vigorously, "I will lay down my life for you."

Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

Embarrassment, grief, and tension all can heighten the senses and imprint details indelibly onto one's memory. That incredible night was forever vivid to the disciples, not least after the resurrection when they could put it into the proper perspective and appreciate fully what had happened and what Jesus had said. That was the evening Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper: but its significance awaited the events of the next three days. The fullest implications of the foot-washing, too, became clear in retrospect. Then the disciples could better understand that Jesus's washing his disciple's feet provided not only a moral example (13:15) but also a sign of the redemption and purification he was about to accomplish on their behalf (13:10f.). He not only washed their feet with water;

much more, by his mission that weekend he would wash them completely. Again, he himself was the “living water” that quenches all thirst (4:10; 7:37), and he would provide the Spirit as a continuous fount of “living water” within each believer (7:38).

That night Jesus took advantage of the disciples’ heightened senses to discourse one last time on many themes. No doubt he returned to many of the same themes after his resurrection (cf. Acts 1:3); but to explain some of these things, even in enigmatic fashion, before the cross, would ultimately assure his disciples that he was not himself caught off guard. The cross was neither a mistake nor a second thought but part of his mission—indeed, the central part. “I have told you now before it happens,” he said, “so that when it does happen you will believe” (14:29).

Perhaps one of the most amazing features of this “Farewell Discourse,” as it has come to be called, is its beginning. It is Jesus who is going to the agony of the cross; it is Jesus who is troubled in spirit. Yet on this night when of all nights it would have been appropriate for his disciples to encourage him and support him, we discover that they can see only their loss. Jesus therefore must encourage them. On the very night he is to taste death on their behalf, he speaks to their confused bewilderment, fickle faith, dim vision, and self-absorption; and he says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . .”