

John 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper, he laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.

Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet?

Jesus answered him, What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterwards you will understand. Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.

Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus said to him, The one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean, but not every one of you.

[1 : 10] For he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, Not all of you are clean. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, Do you understand what I have done to you?

You call me teacher and lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

I am not speaking of all of you. I know whom I have chosen, but the scripture will be fulfilled. He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place, you may believe that I am he.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send, receives me. And whoever receives me, receives the one who sent me. After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit and testified, Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.

[2 : 21] The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side. So Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.

So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.

So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then, after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, What you are going to do, do quickly.

Now no one at the table knew why he had said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the money bag, Jesus was telling him, Buy what we need for the feast, or that he should give something to the poor.

So after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out, and it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.

[3 : 20] If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I

also say to you, Where I am going you cannot come.

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.

Simon Peter said to him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered him, Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward. Peter said to him, Lord, why can I not follow you now?

I will lay down my life for you. Jesus answered, Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, The rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

John chapter 13 is a very important chapter, helping us to understand the meaning of Christ's death. We should begin by noticing the similarities between chapter 12, verses 1 to 8, and chapter 13, verses 1 to 11.

[4 : 27] There's a meal before the Passover. There's washing feet. There's a reference to coming death. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus performs an action symbolizing his death in his institution of the Lord's Supper.

Here, Jesus performs a different symbolic action, with a similar purpose. We might ask why John omits any reference to the institution of the Supper, or why does his chronology seem to place the Last Supper before the celebration of the Passover.

Perhaps because John wishes to present Jesus as the Passover Lamb. We see this in chapter 1, verses 29 and 36, also in chapter 19, verse 36. Luke is all about meals and eating, but John has focused upon water and washing, and it's not entirely surprising, then, that the symbol of Christ's death here is a washing action rather than a meal.

Also, as I've noted on other occasions, John could probably presume that the majority of his hearers were familiar with at least one of the Synoptics. He would not need to repeat something that they were already familiar with.

Of course, they would be familiar not only with the story, but also with the instituted practice of the Lord's Supper that they were presumably practicing in their communities. Verse 1 to 3 present us with a situation within which all of the key details have been aligned, and the scene is fully set for what takes place next.

[5 : 42] Jesus knows that his hour has come. This was heralded in the preceding chapter with the reference to the Greeks coming. This was a sign that his hour had arrived. He's going to depart out of the world to the Father.

He's loved his own who are in the world, loving them to the end. And during the supper, the devil puts into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him, and he knows that the Father has given all things into his hands, that he has come from God, and that he is going to God.

All of the pieces are now in place, and Jesus gets up, takes a towel, washes his disciples' feet, and dries them with the towel. The deliberate manner in which the action is entered into underlines its significance.

The more that Jesus is exalted, the more that he soups to serve his people. The very first thing that Jesus does when he knows that the Father has given all things into his hands is to take those hands and use them to wash his disciples' feet.

The costliness of the liquid was stressed in chapter 12 verse 3, when Mary anointed Jesus' feet with the nard in a way that anticipates this event. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet is achieved with a far more costly liquid, with his own blood.

[6 : 49] The foot washing ultimately points to what Jesus is going to do in his death. It's a symbol of Jesus' love for his disciples. He loved them to the end, the end referring to his death. He removes his garments as they will be removed at his crucifixion, wrapping himself in a linen towel as he will be wrapped in linen cloths at his burial.

He lays down his life in order to take it up again, and here he lays aside his garments in order to take them up again. The disciples are reclining to eat, and their feet would have been outside of the sphere of conversation or fellowship, a realm that Jesus enters in order to minister to them.

Once again, the disciples would only fully understand the meaning of Jesus' action at a later point, when they saw what he did in the cross and resurrection. The washing is absolutely essential.

Without Jesus' act of service, we would have no part in him, and Peter's objection is in some ways parallel to Judas' objection in the preceding chapter. Judas objected to the costliness of the liquid

that was poured upon the feet, and presented this argument that seemed very pious on the surface, that it should be given to the poor.

Peter's objection is an objection to the symbolic action displaying the necessary work of Christ. Why should my master, the one who is so much greater than me, engage in this action for me?

[8 : 02] Judas is headed for betrayal. Peter is headed for denial. Both of their forms of resistance are resisting something that needs to be done. What should we make of verse 10, where Jesus says that the one who is bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean?

Perhaps it should be taken as a reference to baptism and all that that stands for. The feet are the part of the body that come into direct contact with the judgment-bearing dust, and the foot washing is more akin, perhaps, to the forgiveness of sins over the course of the Christian life, as we continually return to our first washing.

It isn't just a symbol of Christ's death, though. It's also a model to follow. This is the form that our life should take together with others. It's the way that we should follow the example of Christ, in setting aside our supposed priority and putting others before ourselves.

Jesus quotes Psalm 49 verse 1, speaking of Judas. The psalm itself has interesting resonances. Perhaps the opening statement of it, blessed is the one who considers the poor, might remind us of Judas' false concern for the poor in the preceding chapter.

The psalm then speaks of enemies, saying of David that he is lying down, never to rise up, in the verse prior to the one that Jesus quotes. David praised God that he would raise him up, in verse 10 of the psalm, the verse after the one that Jesus quotes.

[9 : 19] All of these themes seem to be fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection. In the final hours prior to Jesus' capture, we are told that Jesus was troubled in his spirit. A similar expression was used a chapter earlier, in chapter 12 verse 27.

Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. The coming of the long-awaited hour is a theme that runs throughout the Gospel of John.

The hour is the hour of Christ's suffering and his death. It's also paradoxically the hour of his glorification. Nevertheless, it's a time of great anguish, and the troubling of spirit that Jesus experiences here is similar to that described in the Synoptic Gospels in the context of Gethsemane. Jesus makes a solemn statement about the fact that one of the twelve will betray him. The disciples, uncertain about what he might mean, inquire among themselves, and Simon Peter inquires of the disciple closest to Jesus, the disciple whom Jesus loves, reclining in Jesus' bosom. This description of the beloved disciple, the author of the Gospel of John, is one that should remind us of chapter 1 verse 18, where the word is described as being in the bosom of the father.

[10 : 30] In both cases, we see that a witness is qualified for their witness-bearing by virtue of their intimate relationship with the one to whom they bear witness. Chapter 13 verse 2 declared that Satan had put the plan to betray Christ into the heart of Judas, and now in verse 27, he entered into Judas personally.

This occurred after Jesus gave Judas the morsel. In Romans chapter 12 verse 20, Paul uses a related verb to the noun that John uses here for morsel, to describe the way that we should give something to a hungry enemy to eat.

As Matthew Colvin has observed in writing about this, Jesus gives a morsel to his enemy at this point. After he is given that morsel, Satan enters into Judas and Judas goes out.

There is a symbolic power to this exchange, beyond the fact that it reveals Jesus' knowledge of his betrayer. This is a final act of grace of Jesus towards Judas, is a final opportunity for Judas to draw back from the brink.

The words that follow are incredibly powerful and illustrate something of the ability of the Gospel writers to establish the emotional tone and theological force of a scene with the greatest economy of details.

[11 : 38] And it was night. Throughout the scripture, mention of the rising or the setting of the sun are seldom purely incidental. We might think of the rising of the sun as Jacob limps away from the ford of the Jabbok, or the rising of the sun after the crossing of the Red Sea and the waters coming back over the Egyptians.

We might think of the sun setting upon Sodom as the angels meet Lot at the gate. In the Gospel of John, the period of darkness that begins here lasts until the discovery of the resurrection in chapter

20, where the light of a new day dawns.

The Gospel of John explores themes of darkness and light throughout. Jesus is the light that has entered into the world. In John chapter 9 verses 4 to 5, we have an example of such speech. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. The sun of righteousness is now going to be eclipsed in death before rising again on Easter morning.

Judas goes out into the darkness of the night, while the rest of the company remains in the light of Jesus' presence. In giving the morsel to Judas and instructing him to do what he is about to do quickly, Jesus actively consents to and precipitates the events that will lead up to his capture and his crucifixion.

[12:52] The giving of the morsel and the departure of Judas is something of a watershed. A chapter earlier, a similar watershed moment occurred as the Greeks came to see Jesus. Jesus then spoke that the time had come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

In verse 27 to 32 of that chapter, he has spoken further about that coming glorification. In verses 31 to 32 of chapter 13, this glorification is in the process of happening.

References to the Son of Man are not as common in the book of John as they are in the synoptics. They are also largely clustered in the first half of the book. When Jesus does speak about the Son of Man, he is mostly speaking about the Son of Man being lifted up or glorified.

This probably looks back to Daniel chapter 7, where the Son of Man comes to receive the kingdom from the ancient days on the clouds of heaven. The glorification is spoken of as something that has already occurred, but also as something that will occur in some sense.

It has definitely taken place, but in another sense it still waits to be outworked. Jesus here refers back to the conversation that he had with the Jews in chapter 7 verses 33 to 36, where he has spoken about his departure.

[13:59] There he had said that he would only be with them a little longer, that he was going to the one who had sent him, and that they would not be able to find him. Jesus makes a similar statement to his own disciples here. He follows this by teaching them what he calls a new commandment.

A commandment that they love each other as Jesus has loved them. There is perhaps a paradoxical character to this. On the one hand, such a commandment to love does not seem to say anything that we do not encounter in the Old Testament itself.

On the other hand, however, it is described as a new commandment. The paradoxical character of this commandment is even more clearly seen in 1 John chapter 2 verses 7 to 8.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

We see something similar in 2 John verses 5 and 6. We find a related statement in John chapter 15 verses 9 to 10.

[15:18] How ought we to understand the newness of this commandment?

It seems to me that it is especially important that this love is demonstrated by Jesus himself. We love as he has loved us. The former commandment to love, which summed up and fulfilled the law, could summarise the commandments, but it had not been concretely realised in history.

In the way that the commandment to love is realised in the person of Jesus and in his sacrifice, in the new covenant, love is not just the overriding principle of proper behaviour in relationship to God and neighbour.

Love is witnessed in the person of Jesus Christ and in his redemptive action, and the love that is witnessed is the love of God himself. As we receive the love of God in Christ, we should express that love to others as we love them as he has loved us.

Love, then, is not just an ethical principle. It is a fact and reality of history known in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. As we live out of this reality, we are fulfilling the new commandment in which all of the old commandments are fulfilled and brought to their proper telos in the new covenant, writing the law of God upon the hearts of a people that now embody love.

[16:37] Earlier in this chapter, Jesus played out the sacrificial action that he would perform on the cross in washing his disciples' feet and drying them. That is the example that we should follow, and it will be the means by which people know that we are his disciples.

