

**I AM**

**LESSON FIVE**

**COMMENTARY**

# COMMENTARY NOTES

## JOHN 14:1-7

**D. A. Carson, in the *Pillar Commentary*, explains why Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life:**

**14:1.** It is Jesus who is heading for the agony of the cross; it is Jesus who is deeply 'troubled' in heart (12:27) and spirit (13:21). Yet on this night of nights, when of all times it would have been appropriate for Jesus' followers to lend him emotional and spiritual support, he is still the one who gives, comforts, instructs. For they, too, are *troubled* (same verb as the verses just cited)—not because they are rushing toward pain, ignominy, shame, crucifixion, but because they are confused, uncertain of what Jesus means, and threatened by references to his imminent departure. However appropriate it may be to cite the words *Do not let your hearts be troubled* at Christian funerals, they were first addressed to disciples who under substantial emotional pressure were on the brink of catastrophic failure.

The links with the previous chapter, then, are two. First, there is an implicit tie to Peter: if *his* faith is about to shatter, will the other disciples prove more stable in their trust? Small wonder the Eleven are profoundly upset. Second, and more broadly, because of the disciples' turmoil Jesus unpacks at some length the implications of his impending departure (13:33, 36).

The way the disciples are to calm their hearts is spelled out in the second part of the verse: *Trust in God; trust also in me*. The two verbs rendered 'trust' (*pisteuo*; cf. notes on 1:12) could be either indicative or imperative, leading to the following principal translations: (a) indicative/indicative: 'You trust in God and you trust in me'—which at some marginal level is true, but not obviously appropriate in this context since the core problem of the disciples' felt turmoil is lack of trust; (b) indicative/imperative: 'You trust in God; trust also in me' (or the variation of Bultmann [p. 600], 'Do you believe in God? Then believe also in me')—which makes sense as an invitation to extend the object of their faith beyond God as they have known him in the past to Jesus as well, but it is not clear, from their troubled hearts, that their trust in God is very secure at this point; (c) imperative/imperative: 'Trust in God; trust also in me' (NIV). This is the way the verbs were taken in nearly all the Old Latin MSS, and it makes most sense of the context.

Although the last option is best, all three assume a formidably high Christology, for they link Jesus with the Father as an appropriate object of faith. For thoughtful readers of the Gospel, however, the link is almost inevitable. If Jesus invariably speaks the words of God and performs the acts of God (5:19ff.), should he not be trusted like God? If *he* tells his followers not to let their hearts be troubled, must it not be because he has ample and justifiable reason?

**14:2-3.** The reason is now spelled out: Jesus' departure is for the disciples' advantage. True, he is going away, but he is going away to prepare a place for them, and he will come and get them so that they may be where he is. What more could they ask for?

Thus far all the commentators agree. But the language used of Jesus' 'coming back' and 'being with' his disciples refers at various places in these chapters to different things: sometimes to Jesus' return to his disciples after his resurrection, sometimes to Jesus' 'coming' to them by the Spirit after he has been exalted to the glory of the Father, and sometimes to his 'coming' at the end of the age (in this chapter, cf. notes on vv. 18-20 and 22-23). Indeed, in the view of some commentators, the language in vv. 2-3 is purposely ambiguous in order simultaneously to refer to more than one coming (so, for instance, Westcott, 2. 168; Lagrange, pp. 373-374; Strachan, p. 280; Barrett, p. 457). More idiosyncratic interpretations of vv. 2-3 have also been put forward. Some think that the Christian's death and departure to be with Jesus is in view (Lightfoot, pp. 275-276; Bultmann, p. 602). On the face of it, however, the only death in the context is that of Jesus, while the collective framing of the promise ('I will come back and take *you* [plural] to be with me') cannot easily be squared with such an interpretation (cf. Fischer, pp. 310-311). Gundry<sup>2</sup> argues that vv. 2-3 refer to the fellowship the disciples of Jesus will enjoy with Jesus through the Spirit, but this, as we shall see, largely turns on an unlikely rendering of the word translated *rooms*.

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The details of the text argue that these two verses refer to the second advent of Jesus, when he comes to take his followers to be with him forever. The Greek word *mone*, cognate with the verb *meno* ('to remain', 'to stay', 'to dwell'), properly signifies a 'dwelling place'. Because the Latin Vulgate rendered it *mansiones*, the av/KJV, followed by the RV used 'mansions'. However, since heaven is here pictured as the Father's *house*, it is more natural to think of 'dwelling-places' within a house as *rooms* (NIV) or *suites* or the like. The only other place the word occurs in the New Testament is in 14:23: 'My Father ... [and I] will come to him and make our *home* with him'—i.e. the believer, indwelt by the Spirit, thus becomes the 'dwelling-place', and hence the 'home', of the Triune God. It is by reading this referent of the word in v. 23 back into v. 2 that Gundry finds warrant for his view that the coming of Jesus in vv. 2–3 is the bestowal of the Spirit. The fact remains that the word *mone* simply means 'dwelling-place'; there is no more reason to read the *referent* of that word (i.e. to what dwelling-place the word refers) in v. 23 back into v. 2 than the reverse: in both instances the context must decide. Further, there is no good reason to picture these dwelling-places in v. 2 as way-stations, temporary lodgings, even though the Latin *mansiones* can have that force. Against Origen and those who have followed him (e.g., Temple, p. 226), heaven is not here pictured as a series of progressive and temporary states up which one advances until perfection is finally attained. The word carries no such overtones, and there are no hints in the context to support such a view. Nor does *my Father's house* here refer to the church as the spiritual house or temple of God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Pet. 2:5): that metaphor is not found in the Fourth Gospel. Moreover, even in passages where the metaphor is teased out, the church is referred to as the house of God, but never 'the Father's house' or 'my Father's house'.

The simplest explanation is best: *my Father's house* refers to heaven, and in heaven are many *rooms*, many dwelling-places. The point is not the lavishness of each apartment, but the fact that such ample provision has been made that there is more than enough space for every one of Jesus' disciples to join him in his Father's home. Besides, have they not just been encouraged to trust him (v. 1), and always found strong reason to do so? Can they not therefore be assured that if heaven were other than what he has described, he would have told them (cf. Additional Note)?

*I am going there to prepare a place for you*: the words presuppose that the 'place' exists before Jesus gets there. It is not that he arrives on the scene and then begins to prepare the place; rather, in the context of Johannine theology, it is the going itself, via the cross and resurrection, that prepares the place for Jesus' disciples. And if he takes such trouble, all to prepare a place for his own, it is inconceivable that the rest should not follow: *I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*. Unlike some other passages that look to the *parousia*, this one focuses less on apocalyptic elements and the winding-up of the cosmos (cf. Mk. 13:24–27; 2 Thes. 2) than on the comfort to be enjoyed by believers in the presence of God (cf. 1 Thes. 4:15–18)—which is different again from those passages that offer solace to the believers on *their* death (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23).

**14:4.** Although Jesus tells his disciples, *You know the way to the place where I am going* (cf. Additional Note), the next verse demonstrates that, at some level, they know nothing of the sort. John's point is not that Jesus has made some terrible error in assessing his disciples, but that precisely because they know him they *do* know the way to the place he has just prescribed. Once again it is by reading on and then coming back and re-reading the text that we find Jesus' anticipation of his clear, impending statement that he himself is the way (v. 6).

**14:5.** Thomas (cf. notes on 11:16; 20:24) appears in the Fourth Gospel as a loyal, even a courageous, disciple, but one who is liberally endowed with misapprehensions and doubts. His question sounds as if he interpreted Jesus' words in the most crassly natural way: he wants an unambiguous destination, for without such a destination how can one meaningfully speak of the route there? Dodd (*IFG*, p. 412, n. 1) goes beyond the evidence when he argues that the sequence runs like this: Jesus: 'You know the way; you do not need to know where it leads.' Thomas: 'If we do not know the destination, how can we know the way?' In fact, Jesus has just spelled out the destination (vv. 2–3) and advised them that they *also* know the way (v. 4). Thomas replies, in effect, that he (and the other disciples) have not really come to grips with what he has said about the destination, so how could Jesus' further insistence that they know the way bear coherent meaning?

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**14:6.** The second half of this verse shows that the entire verse must be taken as the answer to Thomas' question. This means that *way* gains a little emphasis over *truth* and *life*. This is not to say that v. 6a should be interpreted as a semitism, the first noun governing the other two ('I am the way of truth and life', and hence 'I am the true and living way'); the three terms are syntactically coordinate, and Greek has other ways of expressing subordination. Still, if Thomas' question and v. 6a demonstrate that *way* is the principal theme, it follows that *truth* and *life* enjoy a supporting role: Jesus is the way to God, precisely because he is the truth of God (cf. notes on 1:14) and the life of God (cf. notes on 1:4; 3:15; 11:25). Jesus is the truth, because he embodies the supreme revelation of God—he himself 'narrates' God (1:18), says and does exclusively what the Father gives him to say and do (5:19ff; 8:29), indeed he is properly called 'God' (1:1, 18; 20:28). He is God's gracious self-disclosure, his 'Word', made flesh (1:14). Jesus is the life (1:4), the one who has 'life in himself' (5:26), 'the resurrection and the life' (11:25), 'the true God and eternal life' (1 Jn. 5:20). Only because he is the truth and the life can Jesus be the way for others to come to God, the way for his disciples to attain the many dwelling-places in the Father's house (vv. 2-3), and therefore the answer to Thomas' question (v. 5). In this context Jesus does not simply blaze a trail, commanding others to take the way that he himself takes; rather, he is the way. Nor is it adequate to say that Jesus 'is the Way in the sense that he is the whole background against which action must be performed, the atmosphere in which life must be lived' (Sidebottom, p. 146): that assigns Jesus far too passive a role. He is himself the Saviour (4:42), the Lamb of God (1:29, 34), the one who so speaks that those who are in the graves hear his voice and come forth (5:28-29). He so mediates God's truth and God's life that he is the very way to God (cf. de la Potterie, p. 938), the one who alone can say, *No-one comes to the Father except through me*.

In the framework of this Gospel, this exclusivism is directed in at least two directions. First, it is constrained by the salvation-historical consciousness of the Evangelist: *i.e.*, now that Jesus has come as the culminating revelation of the Father, it is totally inadequate to claim that one knows God, on the basis of the *antecedent* revelation of bygone epochs, while disowning Jesus Christ. Indeed, the test of whether or not Jews in Jesus' day, and in John's day, *really* knew God through the revelation that had already been disclosed, lay in their response to the supreme revelation from the Father, Jesus Christ himself, to which the Scriptures, properly understood, invariably point (cf. notes on 5:39-46). Second, even if John's language utilizes metaphors and images common amongst the religions of the Roman world and well attested in diaspora Judaism, he does not mean for a moment to suggest that Christianity is merely one more religion amongst many. They are ineffective in bringing people to the true God. *No-one*, Jesus insists, *comes to the Father except through me*. That is the necessary stance behind all fervent evangelism (cf. notes on 20:30-31).

**14:7.** The meaning of the first part of v. 7 turns on a textual variant. The variant behind the NIV text is basically negative: If you really knew me [and you don't], you would know my Father as well. Although this reading is strongly attested, it appears to have been influenced by v. 8, where Philip reveals the depth of his ignorance, and by 8:19. The reading of the second-century papyrus P66, the uncial Sinaiticus, the first hand of Codex Bezae (D) and some other witnesses is more or less preserved in the NIV fn., and has good claims to authenticity: If you have come to know me, you will know my Father also. The assumption, in other words, is that at least the disciples have come to know Jesus ('really' in the NIV fn. casts doubt on this, and is textually unwarranted); what they must understand is that this knowledge of Jesus is the entree to true knowledge of the Father. From now on, Jesus insists, you do know him and have seen him. The contracted pair of words rendered From now on (ap'arti), could be read as one word (there were usually no spaces between words in the early uncial manuscripts) with the meaning 'assuredly'. It is tempting to think that is what Jesus means here: 'and assuredly you do know him and have seen him.' If we retain From now on, the reference is to the time the disciples have come to know Jesus during his ministry, and especially through the hour of his death and resurrection, now immediately upon them.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 487-493.

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**Colin Kruse, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, speaks of Jesus's comforting words to the disciples in the midst of trouble:**

After Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he spoke of deeply troubling matters: one of them would betray him, he was going to leave them, and Peter would disown him. Shortly the disciples would see their master led away for trial; then be condemned to death on a cross. Their faith would be sorely tested. It was to fortify them in these circumstances that Jesus' teaching, beginning in 14:1-11, was given.

**1.** Though deeply troubled by the prospect of his own betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus concerned himself with his disciples' distress. He said to them, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.* Their faith in God, and in particular their faith in Jesus, would enable them to calm their hearts as they faced what lay ahead.

**2.** Having urged his disciples to maintain their trust in him even though he was soon to leave them, Jesus gave them further grounds for doing so: *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.* God's eternal dwelling place is portrayed as his 'house' (*oikia*) with many 'rooms' (*monai*), sufficient to provide a 'place' (*topos*) for all Jesus' disciples. Jesus' going was to prepare 'a place' for them in God's 'house', and he assured them that if this were not the case he would have told them so.

The word translated 'rooms' (*monai*) is rare. It is not found in the LXX, and occurs only twice in the NT, both in the Fourth Gospel (1, 23). In 14:23 Jesus says, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home (*monen*) with him.' The text speaks of the Father and the Son making their 'home' with believers, i.e. making themselves present with them. When we unpack the metaphor of 14:2, then, we should think not so much of 'rooms' in God's house (much less 'mansions' as the AV has) but of the privilege of abiding in God's presence.

When Jesus said, 'I am going to prepare a place for you,' we should not think of him returning to heaven, and having arrived there, setting about the construction of 'rooms' for his disciples to occupy—a task he has now been occupied with for some two thousand years! Rather, we should recognize that it was by his very going, by his betrayal, crucifixion and exaltation, that he made it possible for us to dwell in the presence of God. The imminent departure of Jesus, which so troubled the hearts of his disciples, was in fact for their benefit.

**3.** Jesus added, *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.* Jesus' coming back has been variously interpreted: (1) his coming to the disciples following his resurrection (cf. 20:19-29); (2) his coming in the person of the Holy Spirit (cf. 14:15-21); (3) his second coming at the end of this age (cf. 14:28; 21:22-23); and (4) his 'coming' to take his disciples to be with him when they die. The third alternative is the correct one: Jesus' going in this context is his return to the Father's presence in heaven (via his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension), and it is to heaven he will take his disciples when he returns for them. This did not occur when he came to them following the resurrection, nor with the coming of the Holy Spirit, but will occur at his second coming. (The fourth suggestion, comforting though it is to think of Christ 'coming' for us when we die, is not something that receives any support in this passage.) Jesus' return at the end of the age is not a major theme in the Fourth Gospel; nevertheless, it is implied in a couple of other places (28; 21:22-23). These are sufficient to show that, while the Fourth Gospel emphasizes the present experience of eternal life and the presence of Jesus with his disciples through the Holy Spirit, the hope of his return and of their being with him in the Father's presence still remains the ultimate goal.

Jesus' promise to come back and take his disciples to be 'with me' is expressed by the words *pros hemauton*, which is idiomatic for 'to my home' (cf. Luke 24:12 NRSV). Thus Jesus sought to fortify his

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disciples by telling them that by his departure he would prepare places for them in his Father's house, and that he would return to take them to his home there.

**4-5.** Having told his disciples the purpose of his departure, Jesus said, *You know the way to the place where I am going.* He had spoken about the place he was going—to the Father—and the way he was to get there—by way of the cross and resurrection—and he expected his disciples to understand this. But they did not, and speaking for them all, *Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'* They wanted to follow Jesus, but said they did not know where he was going, and therefore they could not know the way he was taking.

**6.** In response to Thomas' implied question about the way to the Father, *Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life.'* This statement contains the sixth of seven 'I am' sayings with predicates in the Fourth Gospel (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Fundamental to Jesus' response to Thomas' question was that Jesus himself is the way—that he is the truth and the life are supporting statements. Jesus is the way to the Father primarily because his death made access to the Father's presence possible for sinful human beings. He is also the way to God because he is the truth: he brought the truth of God into the world (1:14, 17; 8:32, 40, 45-46; 14:6; 18:37), proclaiming it and embodying it. Therefore, when people come to Jesus, they come to the one in whom the truth about the Father is found.

Jesus is also the way to the Father because he is the life. In various ways the Fourth Gospel speaks of Jesus as 'the life'. In 1:4 we are told, 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men,' and in 5:26 Jesus says, 'as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself'. In 6:33, 35, 48, 51 Jesus speaks of himself as the 'bread of life', and in 11:25 he says, 'I am the resurrection and the life.' All these texts reflect the fact that the life of God was found in Jesus. Therefore, when people come to Jesus they come to the one in whom the life of the Father is found, and in this sense also Jesus is the way to the Father.

In this text Jesus not only said that he was 'the way the truth and the life'; he also added, *No one comes to the Father except through me.* No-one else can bring people to God, for no-one else has seen God or made him known (1:18; 3:13), no-one else speaks and embodies the truth about God as he does, no-one else shares the very life of God, and no-one else has dealt with the problem of human sin so as to bring people back to a holy God. This means that no-one can claim to know God while rejecting Jesus his Son (5:23; 8:42).

**7-8.** Because Jesus was one with the Father and embodied the truth and the life of the Father, he could say to his disciples, *If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.* The word 'really' has no counterpart in the original language, but has been added by the NIV translators to bring out the sense of Jesus' statement. He implied that his disciples did not yet really understand who he was. If they did, they would realize they knew the Father as well. Jesus explained, *From now on, you do know him and have seen him.* They did know the Father and had seen him because they knew and had seen Jesus who was one with the Father and embodied the true revelation of the Father. Responding on behalf of all the disciples, *Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'* His response indicated that they did not yet realize who Jesus really was. It also reflected a fundamental human longing—to see God.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 290-294..

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*

David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*

Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Reformed Expository Commentary

Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary

Gerald Borchert, *John*, New Application Commentary

Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John*, New Covenant Commentary Series

Rodney Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary

Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today

Grant Osborne, *John*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary

Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBSH