

# God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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## **In the Upper Room (13:1-14:31)**

These chapters (13-17) may be broken down in a variety of ways. Some see only one farewell discourse running throughout chapters 13-17. Others, however, see at least three different discourses: the first, which occurs in the upper room (13:31-14:31), the second, which occurs in route to the Garden (15:1-16:33), and the prayer for the twelve, which occurs just before they cross over into the Kidron valley (17:1-26). Although the material found in these chapters consists of, for the most part, monologues from the lips of Jesus, it is all "discourse material." This material (John 13-17) may be structured as follows.

### ***Scene One (13:1-30): Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet and Predicts His Betrayal***

There are two parts to the farewell discourse material: (1) In the Upper Room at the Last Meal (13:1-14:31); and (2) On the Way to the Garden (15:1-17:26). The episodes we will consider here are taken from the table fellowship scene in the upper room. First Jesus washes the disciples' feet (13:1-11), interprets what he has done (13:12-20), then predicts his betrayal by one of the disciples (13:21-30).

### **The Literary Features**

The literary features of this scene are as follows: The **PLAYERS** are Jesus and his twelve disciples. The **SETTING** is an upper room in a lodging somewhere in Jerusalem at the end of Passover week. The **ACTION** is that of Jesus coming together with the twelve to eat an evening meal during the Passover. They all seat themselves and are being served when Jesus rises,

removes his outer garment, ties a towel around his waist, takes a bowl of water, and proceeds to wash each disciple's feet. The **DIALOGUE** consists of Peter's objection, Jesus' reply, and then Jesus use of this object lesson to teach his disciples about true humility and greatness, what it means to be his disciple, and how they should see themselves in relationship to one another. The **THEMES** are numerous: the meal they are eating has give rise to much discussion; i.e., is it one of the meals of unleavened bread eaten during the week prior to actual Passover, or are they eating of actual Passover meal? Then there's the statement concerning Satan having already entered into Judas' heart, the practice of washing feet in the Middle East. This is followed by Peter's objection and Jesus' reply to him, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Then there's Jesus' question to them, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" which is followed by his teaching concerning the "teacher-servant" relationship; which is followed with the theme of Satan's influence over Judas and Judas' betrayal of Jesus.

The upper room setting (found in chapters 13-14 and 15-17 on the way to Gethsemane), has a lengthy collection of discourse material. Here we find the largest single collection of Jesus' teaching in the whole of the New Testament. He is preparing his disciples for the transfer of the prophetic mantel, to use the imagery of Elijah and Elisha. They have a completely erroneous concept of what his identity as the Messiah involves and their expectations of him as the Davidic Messiah will not be fulfilled.

As he made the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem to bring about the fulfillment of his death on the cross and the resurrection on the third day, he repeatedly informed his disciples of his impending death, but they did not understand what he was saying to them, nor did they understand what he was saying to them in this setting. He told them in 14:25-26 that the Spirit of God would bring these things to their remembrance and give them an understanding of all that he was saying to them. In the following study of this lengthy monologue and dialogue material, it will be very helpful to keep this point in mind, as well as being helpful and consoling to realize that much of what Jesus said to these men who had been with him for two plus years was not understood by them. Their understanding and insights came later with much labor and help from the Spirit of God.

### **Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet (13:1-5)**

Jesus is about to give the twelve a lesson in "Discipleship 101," learn

the lesson of self-concern and self-control. If you only had a few hours left, what would you do with them? If, as a master of a body of disciples, you had only one last lesson to teach them, what would it be? Why do you think Jesus chose the lesson he did here? One should read these words slowly, capture the drama of his every move and word. Picture them coming into this dimly lit room. They take a place at the table, reclining; likely with some tension present over who sits where.

*It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. <sup>2</sup>The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup>Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup>so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup>After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him (John 13:1-5).*

An underlying motif here in this material is that of unity. An essential criterion for unity among this group of men was "humility," i.e., their attitude toward themselves and one another. In verses 3-11, Jesus humiliates his disciples by humbling himself before them in the act of washing their feet. Why would a teacher and lord wash the feet of his disciples and servants? No doubt, to show them what self-emptying is all about.

To a group of men who could do nothing but argue about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom of God (Mark 10:35-45; Matt 20:20-28; Luke 22:24-27), this was a lesson they desperately needed. Until they learned this lesson, they would do nothing but fight among themselves in a struggle for power. Sad to say this has been the story of Christianity from the first century to the present. The greatest deterrents to the true practice of Christianity are self-centeredness, egoism, and selfishness. Jesus is here exemplifying the antithesis of all this, he washes their feet. But why such an act as this? It was truly a dramatic parable exemplifying what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the ancient Near East foot washing was not a ceremonial custom; rather, it was a very practical or needful service due to the fact that they

traveled about in sandals on dirt or muddy roads or streets, often filled with manure. It was customary to provide water for guests to wash their feet. As a rule, Jews did not require their servants to wash their feet in that it was considered a humiliating or demeaning task reserved for slaves. Jesus' disciples did not think it their place to wash their Master's feet for two reasons. The first, according to rabbinic teaching (as found in a Jewish *midrash* on Exodus 21:2), a Hebrew servant may not be required to wash his master's feet. Secondly, such a gesture would not have occurred to any of them due to the tension among them as to who was to be the greatest figure in Jesus' coming reign.

As a sign of devotion, however, disciples of a Jewish rabbi often washed his feet. In the Jewish book of *Joseph and Asenath*, Asenath (Joseph's Egyptian wife) washes his feet as an act of her love for him (*Joseph and Asenath* 20:1-5). Jesus may be referring to something like this in his comments in Luke 12:37 and 22:24-30).

*He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." <sup>9</sup>"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean (John 17:6-11).*

The issue here concerns the meaning of lordship or, better, "servanthood." Jesus intended to wash Peter's feet but Peter told him "No, you are not going to wash my feet!" Why this reaction from Peter? Perhaps Peter thought that Jesus was trying to embarrass him because Peter hadn't attempted to wash his feet. Or, perhaps, it could have been that Peter had a problem accepting what Jesus was doing. What kind of person is this? What kind of Messiah is this? This wasn't the kind of behavior you would expect of a Messiah. If he was about to bring about the kingdom of God, why was he not acting like a king was supposed to act? If this was not the thinking of Peter, it was very probably what Judas was thinking.

### Jesus Interprets What He Has Done (13:12-20)

*When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them (John 13:12).*

"Do you know what I have do to you?" was Jesus' question (v 12). His answer or explanation is beautiful:

*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 as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (13:13-17).*

Jesus' comment, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand," is curious. Jesus is here trying to communicate to his disciples the importance of emptying themselves of themselves. If Peter would not allow himself to experience the humiliation of having his feet washed by his teacher and lord, he would never know what it truly means to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, who is known to the whole of the human race as one of the most unselfish human being who ever lived. The meaning of servanthood is what this is all about. What kind of service must one be willing to engage in order to be the kind of servant Jesus was teaching them about?

"Later, you will understand." Jesus said to Peter. What did he mean by this? Tomorrow they would see their leader reduced to the level of servant – "a suffering servant" who by his subjection and humiliation as a servant would redeem the whole human race, if they would be willing to acknowledge what he had done. This whole matter of "foot washing" had to do with who "who he was" and "who they were." Was he the Messiah? How, then, does one make sense of what the powers of darkness did to him? He is a Lord, or better, "a God" who washes the feet of the beings he created in order to show them how they should see themselves and one another. Jesus didn't say, "Now I've washed your feet, you wash my feet." Rather he said, "You wash one another's feet." The only persons who are known in Scripture to have washed Jesus' feet were women, one by the name of Mary

who anointed his feet with ointment in John 12:1-8; the other, an unnamed woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair in Luke 7:36-50. If the disciples of Jesus had the heart and mind of these two women, this lesson would have been unnecessary.

### **Jesus Predicts His Betrayal (13:21-30)**

The lesson Jesus wished to teach in the washing of the disciples feet, no doubt took "in time" with all of these disciples, with exception of one. Here is an example of why this lesson was so critical. For one who is so full of self, he cannot think of anything but himself, there is little hope for him. This was, in all probability, the case with Judas. We are told that he was self-serving in that he took from the money-box (John 12:6). His "ego" (a word taken from the Greek first person personal pronoun "I") was so full of self-will that Satan was able to "enter into him," (John 13:27; see also Luke 22:3).

It is hard to say exactly why Judas betrayed Jesus. Perhaps Jesus wasn't playing out the Messianic agenda Judas wanted him to follow. What Judas wanted in a Messiah is hard to say; evidently Jesus' concept of messiahship was not the same as that of Judas. Perhaps this is why Jesus washing his feet was so completely ineffective. "What kind of Messiah is this who washes feet?"

But there is a difference in the way God works and the way we think he ought to work (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9). The word for God's way is "paradox," from a Greek word meaning a thought or opinion placed along side another thought in order to show a contrast. The conqueror of all evil in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation is not a typical symbol of conquest; it is a slain lamb (cf. Rev 5). This Messiah is not one who conquers by swords or spears, he conquers by a cross and empty tomb – a cross on which he was crucified and a tomb that was empty of his resurrected body. Judas never saw this Messiah and saw no value in the Messiah he did see; and such was the case with most of the first century Jewish world, and so with so much of the world today.

### **Conclusion**

If we are Christians, then we will model or emulate "Christ" in our lives. It is not doctrine, nor theology, not even the moral teachings of

Scripture that are to be the objects of emulation for us; rather, Christ is the object of our emulation, Christ is the content of who we are if we are truly worthy of the name "Christians."

We haven't learned this well. We must follow the teachings of Christ because of our belief in the Teacher. We should do what his word says for us to do because he is our Lord. It is who he is that determines who we are, whether teacher and disciple or Lord and servant. If we become teachers, he is our model. If we even become lords (rulers), he is our model. Here is where we find the application of the washing of feet. "A servant is not greater than his master" Jesus says. "Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart," he says in Matt 11:29; yet one of the greatest problems of Christendom is the rule of the "high and mighty" over the "meek and lowly."

Peter must have learned this lesson well, as is reflected in his warning to the elders of the early church not to "lord over the charge allotted to them," (1 Peter 5:3). Sad to say, many of the leaders of the Lord's church today see their role as shepherds of the flock of God as an autocratic rule over the people of God. No one can appreciate a true shepherding spirit in the leaders of the Lord's church better than one who has been subjected to the overseership of a self-willed, self-centered, self-serving group of church leaders.

What is applicable in this text to the leaders in the Lord's church is applicable to every member in the Lord's church, no matter what their role. Especially is this true in the various roles of responsibility we possess, whether parents, employers, government officials, company administrators, shop supervisors, teachers, school officials, ministers, sales people, police, entertainers, and the list could go on and on and on. A good question to ask someone when he begins manifesting too much self-will or self-importance is, "Whose washing feet tonight?"

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