Section I - Words of Comfort and Counsel to the Sorrowing Children

*John 13:31-35; 14:1-4,15-21*

When Judas went out into the darkness of the night on his even darker errand, Jesus began to prepare for His death. Yet He was thankful that the traitor had left. It took a burden off His heart and allowed Him room to breathe and to speak freely. And since it brought Him closer to His final sufferings, it also brought Him nearer the future joy of His resurrection and exaltation to glory. Therefore, after Judas left, His first words were an outburst of genuine gladness. When the false disciple was gone, and the sound of his footsteps had died away, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately” (Jn. 13:31-32).

Jesus had a faith which substantiated things that were hoped for, and made evident things which were not visible (cf. Heb. 11:1). So He was able to see through His impending death to His coming glory. But He also remembered that He had disciples all around Him to whom, in their weakness, His decease and departure would mean nothing less than bereavement and devastation. Therefore, He immediately turned His thoughts to them and began to say things that were appropriate to their inward condition and their outward situation.

In His last words to His men, the Savior used two different styles of speech. First, He spoke to them as a dying parent addressing his children. Then He assumed a higher plain and spoke to them as a dying Lord addressing His servants, friends, and representatives. The words of comfort and counsel that Jesus spoke as a parent are found in the 13th and 14th chapters of John’s Gospel. The directions the departing Lord gave to His future Apostles are recorded in the two chapters that follow. In this chapter, we will consider the dying Parent’s last words to His sorrowing children.

Notice that these words were not spoken in one continuous address. While the dying Parent spoke, the children kept asking Him children’s questions. First one, then another, then a third, and then a fourth asked Him a question based on what He had been saying. Jesus listened to these questions patiently and then answered them one after another. The answers He gave, and the things He said without opening the door for possible interrogations, are all blended together
in the narrative. For our purposes, it will be best to separate the various elements of the narrative and to consider, first, the words of comfort Jesus spoke to His disciples. Then we will address the questions they asked Him. And, finally, we will look at Jesus’ answers. This method will make these words stand out in all of their exquisite simplicity and appropriateness. To show how simple and suitable they were, we present them here in the fewest possible words. They were: (1) I am going away; in My absence find comfort in one another’s love (13:31-35); (2) I am going away; but it is to My Father’s house and, in due time, I will come back and take you there (14:1-49); (3) I am going away; but even when I am away, I will be with you in the person of My alter ego, the Comforter (14:15-21).

As Jesus thinks about the men He is speaking with, He uses the nursery dialect. He addresses His disciples not only as children, but as “little children.” By using these endearing words, He expresses His loving affection toward them and His compassion for their weakness. Then, He alludes to His death in a sensitive, roundabout way that was adapted to their childish capacity and feelings. He tells them He is going on a road on which they cannot follow Him. They will miss Him as children miss their father when he goes away and never returns. “Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You shall seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come; now I say to you also” (Jn. 13:33).

**Jesus’ First Dying Counsel**

After this brief, simple preface, Jesus continued to give His little ones His first dying counsel - namely, that they should love one another in His absence. This counsel was certainly worthy of coming first! For what comfort can be greater for orphaned children than that they experience love for one another? Even if the world is dark and depressing, children will have an unfailing spring of joy in the desert of sorrow if, in their affliction, they become true brothers and sisters to one another by being sympathetic and helpful. On the other hand, if alienation, distrust, and antagonism are added to all the other problems of life, those who are grieving become despondent. Their night of sorrow does not even have a single star by which to alleviate its gloom.

Jesus was anxious to draw attention to a precept that was needed at this time. It even needed reinforcement among the disciples. So He conferred on it all of the dignity and importance of a new commandment and made the love that was required in it to be the distinctive mark of Christian discipleship. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (Jn. 13:34-35). Thus, on that memorable night, Jesus added a third “new thing” to the two already introduced: the new sacrament and the new covenant. The commandment and the covenant were new in the same sense. It was not that they had never been heard before. But for the first time, they were proclaimed with the proper emphasis, and assumed their rightful place of supremacy above the details of the Mosaic moral legislation and the ceremonies of the legal religious system that prefigured Christ. Now love was to be the outstanding royal law. Free grace
was to make the ordinances that came from Mount Sinai obsolete. Why now? In both cases, because Jesus was about to die. His death would be the seal of the New Testament, and it would be an example of the new commandment. It would also ratify the New Testament. So after He presents that new law, He goes on to say, “As I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34). The past tense is not to be interpreted strictly here. The perfect tense must be taken as a future perfect, so it includes the crowning act of the Savior’s love - His death. Jesus was saying, “Love one another as I have loved you, and as you will know that I have loved you when you come to the place where you need the comfort of loving each other in this way.” Understanding His words in this way, we see clearly why He calls the law of love “new.” By giving His life for His people, His own love was a new thing on earth. And when His followers expressed love to one another, and had the same spirit that Jesus had, and were ready to do the same things He did, the world would stare - because it was new. They would be amazed and ask where it came from. The world would perceive that the men who loved in this way had been with Jesus.

Jesus’ Second Word of Comfort

The second word of comfort that Jesus spoke to the little ones He was about to leave was, in general, an exhortation to faith: “Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn. 14:1). More specifically, it is a promise that He would return to take them to be with Him forever. The exhortation is concerned about all the interests of the disciples, secular and spiritual, temporal and eternal. Their dying Master recommends, first, that they exercise faith in God, primarily when they experience the worries of this world. In essence, He says to them: “I am going to leave you, My children; but do not be afraid. You will not be like orphans in the world - defenseless and not provided for. God My Father will take care of you. Trust in Divine Providence and let peace rule in your hearts.” After Jesus exhorts His little ones to exercise faith in God the Provider, He then exhorts them to believe in Him, emphasizing those spiritual and eternal interests for which they had left all and followed Him. “You believe in God for food and clothes. Believe in Me too. And be assured that all I said to you about the kingdom and its joys and rewards is true. Soon you will find it very hard to believe this. It will seem to you as if the promises I made were deceptive, and the kingdom, a dream and an hallucination. But do not allow such dark thoughts to possess your minds. Reflect on the things you know about Me. Ask yourselves whether the One who has been with you during these years would deceive you with romantic promises that would never be fulfilled.”

The kingdom and its rewards - these were the things that Jesus had encouraged His followers to expect. Therefore, He proceeded to speak about them next. He used the style that was suited to the character He had assumed, namely, that of a dying Parent addressing His children. He said, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (Jn. 14:2-3). So more specifically, this
was the second word of comfort. What a wonderful promise for the disciples! In their hour of despondency, the little ones would think of themselves as orphans, without a home on earth or in heaven. But their Friend assures them that they should not only have a home, but a splendid one; not simply a humble shack to shelter them from the storm, but a glorious palace to live in. It would be in a region where storms were unknown. The house would have a great many rooms in it, providing abundant accommodations for them all. It would be far more roomy than the temple which had been the earthly dwelling place of God. His own death would seem to be a great tragedy for them. But it would really mean He was going on before them to prepare a place for them in that splendid mansion. And in due time, His leaving them would be followed by His return to take them with Him. He did not explain what He had to do in order to prepare a place for them. He only added, as if trying to coax them to be more cheerful about the situation, “And you know the way where I am going” (Jn. 14:4). This is what He meant: Think about where I am going - to the Father - and think about My death as simply the way to get there. And so, do not let My absence from the world make you sad. Do not allow My death to be something that you dread.

Students of New Testament theology who are interested in tracing the resemblances and contrasts between different types of doctrine take special interest in this second word of comfort that was spoken by Christ to His disciples. The reason they find it fascinating is because it significantly contains the idea of a Forerunner, which is one of the main thoughts of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The author tells his Hebrew readers that Jesus has gone into heaven, not only as a High Priest, but also as a Forerunner (Heb. 6:20). This is one of the new aspects and glories of the new dispensation. For none of Israel’s high priests went into the Most Holy Place as a forerunner. They only went as a substitute - going for the people into a place where they could not follow him. Jesus, on the other hand, goes into the heavenly sanctuary, not only for us, but before us. And He goes into a place where we may follow Him, where no part of it is screened off, barred, or locked to us. The fourth evangelist, John, pens a similar thought as he records Jesus speaking as the great High Priest of humanity.

These child-like yet profound sayings of the Lord Jesus are comforting. They also stimulate the imagination. The “many mansions” raise many questions and thoughts. We are filled with joy at the thought that the many-mansioned house is capable of containing vast numbers of people. We may also think of the lodgings in our Father’s house as not only having many rooms but also as being very different (earlier Christians believed this to be true, like Cyprian, Irenaeus, etc.). These rooms correspond to the classes or ranks of the residents. But to some, the most wonderful thought of all that is suggested by this expressive, poetic word is the certainty of eternal life. For those who have doubted life after death, their great desire has not been for detailed information about the place, the size, and the architecture of the celestial city. They just want to know for certain that there is such a city - that there is such a house that is not made with hands, eternal in
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the heavens. This desire is provided by these words from Christ. Whatever the “many mansions” means, it at least implies that there is a state of blissful existence that can be reached by believers, just like Jesus reached it - through death. Without a doubt, everlasting life is taught here. And it is taught with authority. Jesus speaks like someone who knows and not (like Socrates) as one who simply has an opinion on the subject. At his farewell meeting with his friends before he drank the hemlock cup, the Athenian sage discussed the question of the immortality of the soul. He strongly believed in it. But he did so as one who looked on it as an intriguing subject for discussion. He knew there was a good deal to be said about it on both sides. But Jesus does more than maintain the reality of the life to come. He speaks about it with absolute confidence. He does not offer us the frail raft of a probable opinion upon which we must dangerously sail down the stream of life toward death. Rather, He offers us the strong ship of a divine word upon which we may sail securely. Socrates and his companions longed for this (Phaedo, chapter 35). Jesus speaks with a full sense of the responsibility that He takes upon Himself. He remarked to His disciples, “If it were not so, I would have told you” (Jn. 14:2b). No one should encourage these kinds of expectations unless he is certain of his position. It was not enough to have an opinion about the world to come. Anyone who took on himself the responsibility of asking people to give up this present world for the sake of the world to come ought to be quite certain that it was a reality, and not a dream. How Jesus sees the weakness of His disciples and ministers to them on their level with these words! What a help, also, it is to our faith in the reality of future bliss! Someone like Jesus Christ would not have spoken in this way unless He had possessed authentic information about the world beyond.

**Jesus’ Third Word of Comfort**

In the third word of consolation, the key thought is the promise of another Comforter who would take Jesus’ place after He went away. He would make the bereaved feel as if He were still with them. In the second word of comfort, Jesus had said that He was going to provide a home for the little ones. Then He would return and take them to that home. In this third and final word, He virtually promises to be present with them by a substitute - even when He is absent. He said, “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (not for a season; Jn. 14:16). Then He tells them who this wonderful Comforter is: His name is “the Spirit of Truth” (Jn. 14:17). Then, finally, He helps them understand that this Spirit of Truth will be a Comforter to them by restoring, as it were, the consciousness of His own presence, so that the coming of this other Comforter will just be, in a sense, His own spiritual return. He assures them with these words: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). He does not promise a different thing, but the same thing He had promised earlier. Now it is expressed in different terms. He does not clearly explain here how the other Comforter would make Himself an alter ego of the departed one. At a later stage in His discourse, He did inform His disciples how the wonder would be achieved. The Spirit would make the absent Jesus present to them again by bringing to their remembrance all His words (vs. 26), by
bearing witness of Him (John 15:26), and by guiding them into an intelligent apprehension of all Christian truth (Jn. 16:13-14). All of this, though it is not said here, is sufficiently hinted at by the name given to the new Paraclete (from the Greek word paracletos, meaning Helper, or the Holy Spirit). He is called the Spirit of Truth, not the Holy Spirit, as in other places, because He was to comfort by enlightening the minds of the disciples in the knowledge of Christ. This would enable them to see Him clearly with their spiritual eyes when they could no longer see Him with their physical eyes.

This spiritual vision, when it came, was to be the true and effective comfort for the Eleven (who had known Him in the flesh) after Jesus was absent from them. It would be like the dawn of a new day, which banishes the fears and discomforts of the night. While the night lasts, all comforts are only partial alleviations of discomfort. A father’s hand and voice have a reassuring effect on the fearful heart of his child as they walk together at night. But while the darkness lasts, the little one is likely to be scared by things that cannot be clearly seen. His fear distorts these things, thus creating horrible images in his little mind. “In the night, men (and children, much more) think that every bush is a thief.” Everyone can sympathize with the feelings of Rousseau: “It is my nature to be afraid of darkness.” Light is welcome, even when it only reveals to us the precise nature and extent of our miseries. If it does not drive sorrow away, it at least helps to make it calm and sober. This kind of cold comfort, however, was not what Jesus promised His followers. The Spirit of Truth would not come just to show them their desolation in all of its nakedness. Nor was He to come just to help them accept it by teaching them to regard their early hopes as romantic dreams - that the kingdom of God was simply an ideal, and the death of Jesus was the fate that is waiting for every sincere attempt to realize that ideal. This would be terrible comfort! To be told that all sincere religion must end in unfaithfulness, and all enthusiasm in despair!

The third word of comfort was introduced by a command Jesus laid on His disciples. He said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Jesus was establishing the true way to show love in contrast to an unprofitable, useless one, which His hearers were in danger of accepting, namely, grieving over losing Him. We may paraphrase the words in this way: “If you love Me, do not show your love by being sorrowful but by keeping My commandments. By doing this, you will provide Me with a real service. Let the precepts that I have taught you from time to time be your concern and do not be troubled about yourselves. Leave your future in My hands. I will look after it. For I will pray to the Father, and He will send you another Comforter.”

But this paraphrase, though it is true as far as it goes, does not exhaust the meaning of this important message. Jesus enjoins the disciples to keep His commandments before the promise of the Comforter because He wants these disciples to understand that the fulfillment of the promise and the keeping of the commandments go together. This truth is hinted at by the word “and,” which forms the connection between the precept and the promise. It is repeated in the
passage we are now considering using various forms of expressions. It is necessary for a person to have moral faithfulness before he can have spiritual illumination. This is clearly taught when the promised Comforter is described as a Spirit “whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him” (Jn. 14:17). It is even more plainly taught in the last verse of this section: “He who has My commandments, and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (Jn. 14:21). In His first great sermon (the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus had said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). In His farewell address to His disciples, He says in essence: “Be pure in heart, and through the indwelling Spirit of Truth you will see Me, even when I have become invisible to the world” (Jn. 14:19).

Life and light go together. This is the teaching of the Lord Jesus, as well as all of Scripture. As we keep in mind this great truth, we are able to comprehend the diverse issues of religious difficulties. While one person moves away from true faith, the enlightened person expresses unwavering faith. Personal and intellectual enlightenment, which involves the extinction of the heavenly lights of faith and hope, is the penalty for not faithfully keeping Christ’s commandments. That which involves the restoration of spiritual lights, after a temporary darkening by the clouds of doubt, is the reward for holding fast one's moral integrity when faith is eclipsed and for fearing God while walking in darkness. Consider the man who, for a while, believed in the divinity of Christ and the life to come. At the end of his life, he believes that Jesus was only a deluded enthusiast and that the divine kingdom is just a beautiful dream. It will be noted that this man did not make any great effort to realize his own ideals. Most certainly, he will not be found guilty of the folly of suffering for it. To many people, the creeds which reduce all religion into impracticable ideals is very convenient. It saves the world from trouble and pain. It allows them to think positive thoughts but does not require them to do noble actions. And it substitutes romancing about heroism for real heroism.