

*Lessons
from the
Upper
Room*

*The Heart
of the Savior*

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

“As I began reading this superb book, I was constantly reminded of Martin Luther’s comment that ‘in Scripture, every little daisy is a meadow.’ Many believers will have read through John 13–17 more than once and may even feel they have a pretty good grasp of its meaning. I was one of them—until I read Sinclair Ferguson’s *Lessons from the Upper Room!* As he wisely says, ‘Our minds are far too finite to understand fully what the infinite Lord of all is doing,’ but the more I read, the more I felt drawn into that amazing upper room, listening, learning—and loving what the Savior was saying. Crystal-clear illustrations and warm-hearted applications permeate these pages—and I will never forget the author’s allegory that he calls ‘The Stranger in Smokeland!’ *Lessons from the Upper Room* is Ferguson at his finest. Get two copies—and share the treasure with someone else!”

—DR. JOHN BLANCHARD
Preacher, teacher, apologist, and author
Banstead, England

“Few passages in Scripture are as influential as John’s Farewell Discourse, but its message is often elusive. Sinclair Ferguson helps us put the pieces of the puzzle in place in the light of the whole Bible. Pull up a chair and listen as Ferguson helps us understand what we overhear from Jesus’ speaking to His disciples and praying to His Father. This book unpacks the drama and meaning of the last night of Jesus’ life and richly explains how this is good news for us today. This is vintage Ferguson—a sensitive reading of the biblical text in light of the whole Bible, with consummate focus on our Savior and His work. Whether you’re familiar with

this passage or have never read it before, this book is sure to be encouraging, edifying, and enlightening. Pick up this book—you'll be glad you did!"

—DR. BRANDON D. CROWE
Professor of New Testament,
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia

"Sinclair Ferguson is one of the few writers in this or any generation of whom it can be said that anything he writes is a must-read. In this book, he transports us to the upper room with Jesus to witness the last hours of His earthly ministry. You will feel like you are there, sitting next to the Lord, savoring the meal, hearing the anxious inquires of the disciples, listening to words that will change everything. Whether you have walked with Christ for many years or have just become a Christian, Dr. Ferguson's years of meditation on these chapters, combined with his unequaled pastoral wisdom, make these pages uniquely accessible to a variety of readers. It is the finest nontechnical treatment of John 13–17 in print."

—DR. GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER
Associate minister of discipleship,
First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, S.C.

Lessons from the Upper Room

Lessons
from the
Upper *The Heart*
of the Savior
Room

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Tintoretto, *Two Apostles*, late 16th century. Image courtesy of The Barnes Foundation.

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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.

—JOHN 13:1

To

My Dorothy
and
Ruth

Loving Helpers
Wise Counselors
Devoted Homemakers
Best Friends

With Love and Gratitude

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Introduction

Lessons from the Upper Room is an invitation to spend a few hours with Jesus' disciples, listening to His teaching and over-hearing Him pray—both for them and for you. It is based on John's gospel, chapters 13 through 17. Here, in five chapters, in only 155 verses, and in less than four thousand words we are given what the Puritan writer Thomas Goodwin called “a window into Christ's heart.”¹

This section of John's gospel has meant a great deal to me since my student days, and I have often thought of writing a book on it simply for my own benefit. But the immediate stimulus behind *Lessons from the Upper Room* came from recording a series of twelve short messages on these chapters for Ligonier Ministries in 2014.

In a sense, these pages are “the book of the movie.” As is often the case, the two are not identical. In this instance, the book has been written several years after the recordings were made and it is probably more than 50 percent longer than a transcript of the original messages. Anyone present at the recording sessions, or who has watched them, will find echoes of them in these pages. But the book is a fuller exposition of these wonderful chapters, and so I hope that even those present at the recording, or who have watched or listened to them, will find it rewarding.

Even so, *Lessons from the Upper Room* is by no means a complete exposition of John 13–17. If that were attempted—to adapt some words of John himself—an entire bookcase could not contain the books that would be written!

Nor are these pages a commentary in any technical sense. They are, perhaps, more like the “audio description” function on my “smart” TV set. This facility provides a running commentary on the action taking place on the screen to help those who can follow the dialogue but are too visually handicapped to see it. So I hope that there will be moments in reading these pages when readers will feel—as I have in writing them—that they are “there” in the upper room itself, meeting with Christ, watching Him, and listening to Him teach and pray.

It is always a privilege to serve alongside Ligonier Ministries and its publishing arm, and I am indebted especially to the audio-video production team and to the editorial team, who, over the years, have become not only guides but friends. I am also grateful to those who joined me for two intensive days of filming during which we worked our way together through Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. And as with everything else in life, my chief debt under God is to my wife, Dorothy, and to the family we love.

The Mind of Christ

John 13:1–12

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 afterward 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." 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?"

In our imagination, let us climb the stairs leading to an upper room on a house in Jerusalem. Here we can eavesdrop on what transpired during the late afternoon and evening of the day before the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thirteen men have come together for a Passover meal. One will leave early on a mission of betrayal. The remaining twelve will later make their way to the garden of Gethsemane.

From there they will be scattered. One will be taken by force on a nightmare journey.

It will bring Him first to the deposed high priest Annas. From there He will be taken to the house of Annas' son-in-law Caiaphas, now the high priest. He will then be taken to the Judgment Hall of Pontius Pilate the Roman governor, then to King Herod and back to Pilate before finally being led along the Via Dolorosa to the cross of Calvary. There He will be crucified.

By this time tomorrow, Friday, the lifeless body of Jesus of Nazareth will be carried to a garden tomb.

But this is not the end, just the end of the beginning. For early on Sunday morning, He will rise again from the dead. He now lives forever as a Prince and Savior. All this is still to come. For now, we have arrived at the upper room.

In less than twenty-four hours, the Savior will be dead—crucified. Well aware that this is His certain destiny, He wants to show His disciples that He loves them to the end.

Soon He will dismiss one of them—Judas Iscariot—from the room to betray Him. Shortly afterward, He will tell another of them—Simon Peter—that before a new day dawns, he will have denied Him three times. Before they leave, He will pray the longest prayer recorded in the New Testament. It is truly “the Lord’s Prayer.” In it, He will disclose the intimacy of His relationship to His heavenly Father and His disciples will overhear expressions of His love and care for them, but also for all those who—like ourselves—will become His disciples in the future.

These are dramatic moments.

But first, let us listen to John’s account of how the evening began:

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 afterward 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." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

And then,

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments [He] resumed his place . . .

Every time we read a passage from the Bible, two different contexts meet together. That is certainly true here.

Contexts

We inevitably read these verses from within our own context.

Because "the sacred writings . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), these verses

will naturally cause us to think about personal questions like, “Is the Lord Jesus Christ central in my thinking and living?” An honest answer would probably be, “Yes, but not always, and never as much as He deserves to be.” As Christians, we are no longer what we once were by nature, but we know we have not yet become what Christ has called us to be. We want to know, trust, and love Him better.

These chapters help us do that by moving Him to the center of our vision and showing us His grace.

But we also need to learn to read these chapters within their own context.

John’s gospel has a clear and relatively simple shape.

It begins with a prologue (1:1–18)—a passage we often read at Christmastime.

It ends with an epilogue (21:1–25)—the passage in which Jesus restores Simon Peter to his Apostolic ministry.

In between, the gospel is divided into two parts or books.

Part 1 (1:19–12:50) is sometimes called the Book of Signs. The words and works of Jesus together point to His identity as the Messiah and Savior. So, for example, He claims to be “the Light of the World.” Those who follow Him will not walk in darkness (8:12). He then illustrates this by giving sight to a man who was born blind (ch. 9).

There are seven signs recorded in chapters 1 to 12.¹ But then the Book of Signs ends abruptly: “When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” (John 12:36b–38, quoting Isa. 53:1).

Part 2 (13:1–20:31) is the Book of the Passion or, as it is sometimes called, the Book of Glory. As it opens, we have been transported, without explanation, to a room above a house in Jerusalem. It is Thursday afternoon of Passover Week, and a meal is already underway. As far as we know, only thirteen men are in the room—Jesus and His chosen Apostles. Now the glory that Jesus has hidden from a world that has rejected Him will increasingly be revealed to the disciples who trusted and loved Him.

John’s “Inside Story”

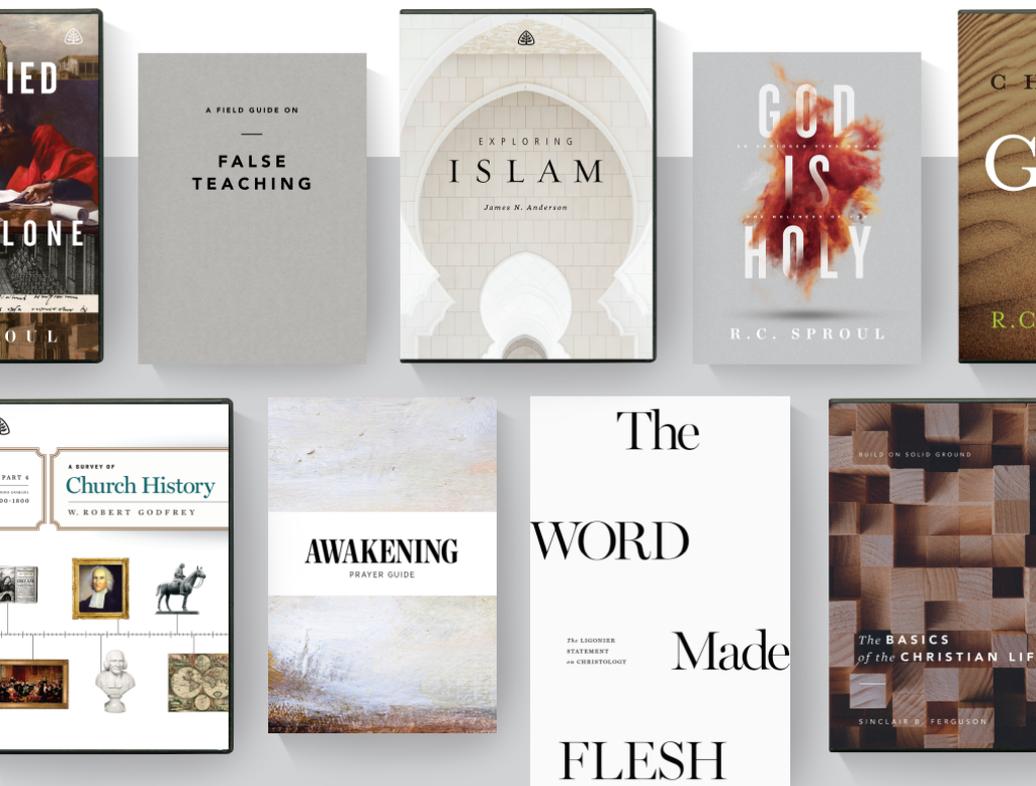
John’s gospel has a quite different feel from the first three Gospels. That is well expressed in a comment made by John Calvin:

The other three are more copious in their narrative of the life and death of Christ, but *John dwells more largely on the doctrine by which the office of Christ, together with the power of his death and resurrection, is unfolded. . . .*

All of them had the same object in view, to point out Christ, *the three former exhibit his body, if we may be permitted to use the expression, but John exhibits his soul.* On this account, I am accustomed to say that this Gospel is a key to open the door for understanding the rest; for whoever shall understand the power of Christ, as it is here strikingly portrayed, will afterwards read with advantage what the others relate about the Redeemer who was manifested.²

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) show us “His body”—they tell the story from the outside, as it were. But

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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“...But take heart; I have overcome the world.” JOHN 16:33

What would you give to spend an evening with Jesus, hearing Him teach and listening to Him pray? This is what we encounter in the Farewell Discourse of John 13–17. As the shadow of the cross loomed, Christ shared His final hours with the disciples to prepare them for His death, quiet their troubled hearts, and intercede on their behalf before the Father.

In *Lessons from the Upper Room*, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson draws us into these intimate hours from the night when Jesus was betrayed. This vivid picture of Christ’s ministry, from His washing the disciples’ feet to His High Priestly Prayer, shows us the heart of Jesus. Discover His deepest desires for His people and take delight in the suffering Savior who has overcome the world.

Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. He previously served as senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and is author of many books, including *The Whole Christ, Some Pastors and Teachers, In the Year of Our Lord, Maturity, and Devoted to God’s Church*.



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