



JESUS’ FAREWELL DISCOURSE

A 12-WEEK STUDY

Stephen Witmer



Douglas Sean O’Donnell
SERIES EDITOR

“This series is a tremendous resource for those wanting to study and teach the Bible with an understanding of how the gospel is woven throughout Scripture. Here are gospel-minded pastors and scholars doing gospel business from all the Scriptures. This is a biblical and theological feast preparing God’s people to apply the entire Bible to all of life with heart and mind wholly committed to Christ’s priorities.”

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BRUCE A. WARE, T. Rupert and Lucille Coleman Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

KNOWING THE BIBLE

Douglas Sean O'Donnell, Series Editor

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Genesis	Ecclesiastes	Acts
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Numbers	Jeremiah	2 Corinthians
Deuteronomy	Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah	Galatians
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The Ten Commandments	The Parables of Jesus	The Sermon on the Mount
The Miracles of Jesus	Jesus' Speech on the Mount of Olives	Jesus' Farewell Discourse

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JESUS' FAREWELL DISCOURSE

A 12-WEEK STUDY



Stephen Witmer

Knowing the Bible: Jesus' Farewell Discourse, A 12-Week Study

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S E R I E S P R E F A C E

KNOWING THE BIBLE, as the title indicates, was created to help readers know and understand the meaning, the message, and the God of the Bible. This series was created and edited by Lane Dennis and Dane Ortlund, and J. I. Packer served as the theological editor. Dr. Packer has gone to be with the Lord, Lane has retired as CEO and president of Crossway, and Dane now serves as senior pastor of Naperville (Illinois) Presbyterian Church. We are so grateful for their labors in overseeing the first forty-plus volumes of this series! To honor and expand upon their idea, we are continuing the series, focusing on key sections from Scripture, such as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

Each volume in the series consists of twelve units that progressively take the reader through a clear, concise, and deep study of certain portions of Scripture. The material works best for a small group, as the questions are designed for good interactive group discussion. Even so, an individual could easily use the material for a personal Bible study as well.

Week 1 provides an overview of the section or sections of Scripture to be studied, which includes placing the text into its larger context (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount within the Gospel of Matthew), providing key historical background, and offering some questions to get started. Weeks 2–12 each have the following features: a summary of how the text fits into the rest of Scripture (“The Place of the Passage”), a summary sentence on the main theme (“The Big Picture”), and ten or so questions (“Reflection and Discussion Questions”). Moreover, each unit highlights the role of the gospel of grace in each text (“Gospel Glimpses”), identifies whole-Bible themes (“Whole-Bible Connections”), pinpoints Christian doctrines (“Theological Soundings”), defines key terms (“Definitions”), and allows space to respond (“Personal Implications”).

Lastly, to help readers understand the Bible better, we urge readers to use the ESV Bible and the *ESV Study Bible*, which are available in various print and digital

formats, including online editions at esv.org. The *Knowing the Bible* series is also available online.

May our gracious God, who has generously given his Spirit and his Word, use this study to grow his people in their knowledge and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Douglas Sean O'Donnell
Series Editor

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

John 13–17 is a remarkable and precious portion of Scripture. In these chapters Jesus washes the feet of his disciples (John 13), prepares them for his imminent departure and their future mission (John 14–16), and prays to the Father in the longest of all Jesus’ prayers recorded in the Bible (John 17). Chapters 13–17 contain numerous words and actions of Jesus not mentioned in the other Gospels, including Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet; his claim to be the way, the truth, and the life; his famous image of the vine and the branches; and his remarkable prayer to the Father. Everything Jesus says and does in John 13–17 is motivated by his exceeding love for his disciples (John 13:1) and is loaded with extra significance because these events occur the night before his crucifixion.

As we approach our study of John 13–17, it is important to be aware that, in order to read John’s Gospel as John intends, we cannot hold it at arm’s length, treating it as merely a set of facts or an interesting historical document. Rather we must receive it personally. This is clear in John 20:30–31, where John announces the purpose of his writing: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” The word “you” in verse 31 addresses readers—including us! John means to awaken and sustain our faith so that we may have spiritual life. To read John’s Gospel the way a scholar studies an archival document about rental rates in New York City in the 1850s is to miss the point.

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

That yellowed document was never addressed to us. But this gospel is. So we are meant to read it as we would read a letter from our landlord telling us he will give us the apartment we have been renting if we are willing to receive it. It is ours for free if we will have it!

Placing It in the Larger Story

John's Gospel comprises two main sections: Jesus' public ministry of signs¹ in John 1–12 (often called the Book of Signs) and the manifestation of Jesus' glory, culminating at the cross, in John 13–21 (often called the Book of Glory). John 13–17 thus comes at a pivotal point in the Gospel, as Jesus turns from his public ministry to a private one, preparing the group of disciples for his imminent death and departure and their subsequent mission to the world.

John 13–17 also forms a crucial pause in the external action of John's Gospel, falling as it does between the ministry activity of John 1–12 and the climactic trial, crucifixion, and resurrection in John 18–21. By contrast John 13–17 contains far fewer actions than words—in these chapters, Jesus teaches and Jesus prays. Importantly, this pause allows the first disciples (and also subsequent readers of the Gospel) to reflect on what has come before and to prepare for the climactic events soon to occur.

Key Verse

“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).

Date and Historical Background

Although there have been many guesses as to who wrote the Gospel of John, the most likely candidate is John, the son of Zebedee, likely the one referred to several times in this Gospel as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” Internal and external evidence suggests that John probably wrote the Gospel between AD 70 and 100 (see *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2015–2017).

Occurring soon after Jesus' triumphal entry² into Jerusalem (John 12:12–19), the events of John 13–17 take place on the Thursday night of the Passover meal (which is explicitly recounted in the other Gospels, but which in John receives only a mention in 13:1). Just before Jesus eats the meal with his disciples, he washes their feet. Good Friday—the day of Jesus' crucifixion—is tomorrow.

Outline of John 13–17

- I. Jesus Loved Them to the End (13:1–20)
- II. Jesus and Judas (13:21–30)
- III. A New Commandment (13:31–38)
- IV. The Expression, Evidence, and Outcome of Jesus' Love (14:1–31)
- V. Abiding in the Vine (15:1–17)
- VI. Hated by the World, Part 1 (15:18–27)
- VII. Hated by the World, Part 2 (16:1–15)
- VIII. A Call to Courage (16:16–33)
- IX. The Prayer of Jesus (17:1–26)

As You Get Started

Have you previously studied John 13–17 on your own or as part of a small group or Sunday school class? Has your pastor ever preached on these chapters? From your previous experience with John 13–17, what knowledge or questions do you bring to this current study?

Skim through John 13–17 and note any questions that arise. Jot these down to revisit throughout the course of this study.

Imagine that somehow you know for certain that you will die tomorrow. With whom will you choose to spend your few remaining hours? What will you say to or do with them? Having considered your own response, now read John 13–17

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

with a view toward seeing Jesus’ response in that same situation. What does this tell us about Jesus?

▶ As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of John 13–17. Take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you, and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Signs** – In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ miracles are referred to as “signs.” They are understood not mainly as wonderful acts of power but as pointers to the identity of Jesus himself. John’s Gospel contains seven signs recorded in John 1–12, climaxing with the raising of Lazarus in John 11.

² **Triumphal entry** – Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey and to popular acclaim from the crowds, with shouts of “Hosanna!” This event is recorded in all four Gospels.

WEEK 2: JESUS LOVED THEM TO THE END

John 13:1–20



The Place of the Passage

John 13:1–20 is crucially important for understanding all that will follow in chapters 13–17 (as well as in the remainder of John’s Gospel). The emphasis on Jesus’ knowledge demonstrates that he is in full control of unfolding events, including his own death. Additionally, the focus on Jesus’ love—including the full significance of the foot washing—shows that Jesus’ coming speech, prayer, and death are expressions of love for his disciples. Jesus will, in turn, form a *community* of those who love one another as he has loved them (13:15).

The Big Picture

Jesus knows his death is imminent and will lead to his return to the Father. In this knowledge, and with full love for the new community he is creating, he prepares his disciples beforehand for his departure and for their future life together.

▶ **Reflection and Discussion**

Read through the complete passage for this study, John 13:1–20. Then review the following questions and record your responses. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2050–2051, or visit esv.org.)

John 13:1 frames everything that Jesus does in John 13–17 as being motivated by his overwhelming love (“to the end”) for his disciples. How specifically do we see Jesus’ love displayed in this passage?

What particular facets of Jesus’ knowledge does John choose to highlight in verses 1–20 (e.g., 13:1, 11)? In what ways does Jesus’ comprehensive knowledge motivate his actions?

To see how John 13:1–20 (and John 13–17 as a whole) functions as a pivot point in the Gospel, identify the references in this passage both to Jesus’ past and to Jesus’ future. Where in this passage is Jesus’ knowledge of his imminent death mentioned (see also 13:33; 14:29; 16:28)?

John's Gospel uses the phrase "his own" (13:1) also in John 1:1–18. To what does this phrase refer in John 1? In John 13:1? What is the significance of its being used both at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and here at the beginning of his private ministry to the disciples?

In what way does John communicate the full responsibility of Judas for his own actions (13:11; cf. 6:66–71; 12:4; 18:1–5)? How does he show the involvement of the devil, or Satan,¹ in what Judas is doing (13:2, cf. 13:27)? How does he demonstrate that even the culpable actions of Judas and the evil plans of Satan are ultimately within the sovereign plan of God (13:18) and are known fully by Jesus (13:11, 19)?

Notice in verses 2–4 the elaborate introduction to Jesus' actions. The main verb of the sentence is "rose," which does not appear until verse 4! How does this long buildup inform what Jesus does? How does it emphasize the importance of the foot washing? Notice also that every little detail of Jesus' actions is recounted in verses 4–5: he rose, laid aside his outer garments, took a towel, tied it around his waist, poured water into a basin, and the like. Why does John slow down so dramatically at this point in his telling of the story?

WEEK 2: JESUS LOVED THEM TO THE END

Jesus’ exchange with Simon Peter in verses 6–11 may seem confusing. Why does Peter refuse Jesus so vehemently? Why does Jesus insist on washing Peter’s feet?

Some church traditions practice foot washing in their worship services in light of Jesus’ words in John 13:14–15. Does your tradition do this? Do you think faithfulness to Jesus’ words requires literal foot washing? Are there other viable ways to obey the spirit of Jesus’ example and instruction?

Have there been situations in your life in which someone of higher status has served you in a humble way? How did you feel in that situation? If you have not experienced this, use your imagination: consider how you would feel if your pastor or boss came to your house and spent ten minutes cleaning your toilet. What would be going through your mind and heart?

According to Jesus’ words to the disciples in verses 12–17, why did he wash their feet? How does he intend his actions to shape the new community he is creating? According to verse 17, what will be the result for those who follow through on Jesus’ purpose?

Jesus' words in verse 20 are delivered with emphasis ("Truly, truly, I say to you"). How do they fit with what he says up to this point in 13:1–20, and why does he emphasize them so strongly?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

THE HOUR HAS COME. Jesus' "hour"² is mentioned throughout John's Gospel and refers to the time of his death on the cross. We are told repeatedly in the first half of the Gospel that it has not yet come. For instance, at the wedding feast in Cana Jesus tells his mother, "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4; cf. 7:6–8, 30; 8:20). However, beginning in John 12 we see a dramatic change. Just after the coming of the Greeks in 12:20–22, Jesus announces, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23) and "For this purpose I have come to this hour" (12:27). In John 13:1 we are told that "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father." Clearly in John's Gospel Jesus' death is not a random incident, an accident, or an afterthought. Rather, the Gospel points to it from the very beginning, for it is at the heart of what Jesus came to do. As John the Baptist says at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (likely speaking better than he knows), "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). Jesus' death is of central importance.

JESUS' LOVE "TO THE END." John 13:1 remarks, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." The expression "to the end" can mean two things. As a temporal phrase it would mean, "He loved them all the way until the end of his life." As an intensive phrase it would mean, "He loved them to the uttermost" or "fully." In this context it probably means both. Jesus loved his disciples as long as he could, and he loved them as much as anyone could. Consider this remarkable love of our Savior. On the eve of his own death, aware of personal betrayal from an intimate companion, at a time when other

people would naturally rely on support from those around them, Jesus reaches out in love to his followers to the end and to the uttermost.

THE FOOT WASHING. It is difficult for us to understand at our cultural distance just how shocking the foot washing would be. In Jesus' time and culture washing dirty feet was a menial, undesirable task. Non-Jewish slaves did it. Very rarely, peers of equal status might wash one another's feet, and only when they wanted to express great love. Never would someone of higher status wash the feet of a lower-status person. But that is what Jesus does. John narrates it in minute detail to emphasize its importance. And the shock value of this symbolic action is entirely appropriate, because it in fact symbolizes something far more shocking. Jesus will cleanse his disciples from their sins through his agonizing death on a Roman cross. By symbolically previewing his sin-cleansing death (13:8) Jesus grants his disciples an embodied experience of the meaning of the cross before it happens. They *see* his humble kneeling. They *feel* his hands scouring grime from their feet. They *hear* the water as it splashes into the basin. When they wonder later whether they really are forgiven, they will recall their experience in this moment and know the love of their Savior.

Whole-Bible Connections

HIS OWN. We are told in 13:1 that, "having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end." In context "his own" refers clearly to his disciples (13:5). But to understand the full significance of that little phrase it is important to see how it is used at the beginning of John's Gospel. John 1:11 says that Jesus "came to his own, and his own people did not receive him." There "his own" refers to the Jewish people. Unfortunately, throughout John 1–12 Jesus' public ministry of signs is largely rejected by the Jewish people. So, in a stunning turn in John 12, Jesus responds to this unbelief by withdrawing from his public ministry of signs and hiding himself (12:36–37). It is no coincidence that, after Jesus has withdrawn from his public ministry to prepare his disciples for his coming death, the phrase "his own" is repurposed and applied to them. "His own" in 13:1 refers not to an ethnic people but to his disciples, those who belong to him through faith, a messianic community that will include both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is creating for himself a new people, a new family (cf. 1:12–13; 20:17).

JUDAS'S DEPARTURE AND BETRAYAL. Importantly, Judas's betrayal was foretold by God through the Scriptures. Jesus demonstrates this by identifying Judas's betrayal as the fulfillment of Psalm 41:9, which refers to Absalom's rebellion against his father, King David. Additionally, Judas's betrayal was foreknown by Jesus himself (cf. John 6:64, 70–71). Jesus' knowledge of Judas demonstrates Jesus' surpassing greatness; he predicts the betrayal to his disciples so that,

when it happens, they will believe that “I am,” which elsewhere in John has clear overtones of God’s self-identification as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14; cf. John 8:58).

Theological Soundings

JESUS’ PREEXISTENCE. John’s Gospel is clear that Jesus’ birth was not the beginning of his existence. Rather, from eternity he was always in perfect fellowship with the Father (John 1:1–4, 18; 8:58; 17:24). In John 13:3–4 we see that Jesus’ assurance of his fellowship with God (from eternity past and into eternity future) motivates his love for his disciples: “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.” Jesus’ utter confidence in his perfect fellowship with God the Father is the basis of his loving action for his own. In other words Jesus’ preexistence is not mere abstract theological truth; it is the basis of our salvation.

HEARING JOHN 13–17 TODAY. As we have seen, John 20:30–31 demonstrates that, as readers of John’s Gospel, we are personally involved. And yet we must also recognize that Jesus’ words and actions in John 13–17 apply first to the original disciples and then secondarily to us. In fact these chapters are applicable to us precisely *because* they apply first to the original disciples. John 13–17 explains how it is that remarkable gospel progress comes from the horrible circumstances of John 18–19. Jesus prepares his disciples beforehand and promises them his own resurrected presence and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As future disciples, we appear briefly in John 17:20–26, where Jesus prays for those who will believe through the “word” of the first disciples. Of course, we could not believe if the disciples had not spoken the gospel word. John 13–17 explains how it is that they spoke even after the crushing events of John 18–19.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of John 13:1–20 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. John 13:1–20

▶ As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of John 13–17. Take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you, and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review in the future.

Definitions

¹ **Satan** – In John 13 “the devil” (13:2) and “Satan” (13:27) refer to the real, personal, incorporeal, spiritual enemy of God.

² **Hour** – In John’s Gospel the term “hour” refers not to a sixty-minute length of time but rather more generally to the period of time in which something occurs—especially Jesus’ betrayal, suffering, and death.