



I will not leave you comfortless

John 13-17

Introduction

We often approach John 13-17 for its perceived deep doctrinal instruction. We imagine that the Savior's principle concern on this, the last night of his earthly ministry, was to disseminate additional doctrinal instruction to his disciples. We imagine that his disciples, on this last night with Jesus, were similarly occupied with and focused on doctrinal and theological concerns (Indeed some see Jesus' entire ministry, earthly and heavenly, in this sort of light—Jesus acting, principally, as the master lawgiver and doctrinal expositor).

Now, there is no doubt that we may find stirring and deep doctrine in these chapters. There is no denying that the Apostles, looking back, probably learned much of a "doctrinal" sort as they reexamined that night's teachings. I suggest, however, that neither Jesus nor his disciples, on this last night together, were principally concerned with "doctrinal" matters. Rather, Jesus had as his most pressing concern the very present and human concerns and worries of his disciples. In John 13-17 we witness Jesus, not so much in his role as most gifted of all doctrinal expositors, but in his role as the truest of friends.

I would like to examine these chapters through this personal, relational lens. Jesus' first interest is to relate with people—one on one, person to person—rather than to be viewed as a great "doctrinal" guru.¹ Jesus is, first and foremost—as the most caring and gifted "people-

¹ We often treat the scriptures as if there were either a "doctrinal exposition" or a "forensic doctrine." The "Law and Prophets." What we often forget and miss is that God is, above all, a Father. This means relationship. The scriptures have much to say about the relationship that exists between us and our Father that have nothing to do with doctrine or law. It's about two people—God and the man—relating.

person” to ever walk this globe—one with whom we can, indeed must, relate personally.² If there are depths to be plumbed in these chapters, this may be the deepest and most valuable of them all.

Why cannot I follow thee?

Let’s put ourselves in the Disciples’ sandals. We have spent the past three years with an incredible man—even if we have not always understood him. In fact, we have often underestimated him. We have come to love and depend upon him. We have looked to him many, many times when uncertain. Now, as we sit together at dinner, he makes this disturbing announcement:

“Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say to you.”³

How do we feel? How do we react? What do we say in response to this unwelcome news? The text tells us precisely how the disciples felt and reacted. We know exactly what they said.

“Simon Peter said unto him, ‘*Lord, whither goes thou?*’

“Jesus answered him, ‘Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards.’

“Peter said unto him, Lord, ‘*why cannot I follow thee now?*’⁴

“I don’t want to spend a single day without you,” Peter seems to say.

² I am not unaware that a certain BYU religion professor got into trouble a few years back with the Apostle Bruce R. McConkie over discourse and teachings concerning having a relationship with Jesus. One only need remember the BYU context at the time, and Elder McConkie’s final address, to sense that we must be careful about reading too much into Elder McConkie’s tirade against “having a personal relationship with the Savior.” Read John 13-17 and tell me the disciples didn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, and he with them. He is nothing if not personal. If he is not personal he is nothing to me.

³ 13.³³

⁴ 13.³⁶⁻³⁷; emphasis mine

“Thomas saith unto him, ‘Lord we know not whither thou goest; and *how can we know the way?*’”⁵

Can you hear the anxiousness in Thomas’ voice? It isn’t only or primarily the simple fear of getting lost that disturbs him. It is the fear that they might not find the way to their most cherished objective—companionship with Jesus.

“Then said some of his disciples among themselves, ‘What is this that he said unto us, A little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.’

They said therefore, ‘*What is this that he saith, A little while?* We cannot tell what he saith”⁶

“What does he mean by ‘a little while’”? the disciples wonder. “How long is that? How long will we be asked to live without his companionship”? Clearly, the disciples are, to say the least, unsettled.

“Where is he going?”

“He says he’ll be gone for a ‘little while.’ How long is that?”

“How long must we carry on without him?”

“Why can’t we just go with him?”

“Why must we live without him?”

“*How* will we live without him?”

“How will we know how to proceed?”

“He’s always been there to help us in moments of doubt and inadequacy. What will we do now in such moments?”

“What will become of us?”

I’ll let the reader add the questions they feel that they might have asked. The point is, the disciples’ minds are not filled with theological musings. They are not thinking about the nature of the Godhead, or degrees of glory, or second anointings. Their concerns are very

⁵ 14.⁵; emphasis mine

⁶ 16.¹⁷⁻¹⁸; emphasis added

immediate and personal. They are about to lose a friend—and much more than a friend. “We do not want to live without this man being part of our life. What in the world will we do without him?”

It would be more than passing strange if Jesus ignored the mood in the room to simply launch into various theological propositions. No, we must, above all else, see, in these chapters, Jesus’ attempt to address the depressed mood of his disciples and try to help them feel better. He is “relating,” and “befriending,” not “discoursing.”

Joseph Smith once said that the key to understanding a parable of Jesus is to determine what question or concern drew the parable out of Jesus. Well, Jesus’ announcement and the disciples’ response to it inform us perfectly as to the mood in the upper room as well as what was foremost on everyone’s mind. Therefore, the Savior’s announcement and the disciples’ response provides the principle key to our understanding of and appreciation for the Savior’s final words to his disciples found in John 13-17.

Let not your heart be troubled

Following are just a few examples of Jesus seeking to comfort very anxious disciples.

“Let not your heart be troubled.”⁷

Perhaps we can now hear the immediate, personal, human, and friendly comfort offered in Jesus’ words. Jesus is not detached from and unresponsive to the anxiety his disciples are feeling. He doesn’t have his head in the clouds as he hies off to Kolob in mystical reflections. Jesus is attuned to what is going on inside his disciples and intends to address their concerns. He seeks to reassure them, comfort them.

“I go to prepare a place for you.”⁸

With this verse, we are inclined to launch into a discussion of the “Three Degrees of Glory.”

⁷ 14.¹

⁸ 14.²

But is this what Jesus intended? Did he mean to teach them about degrees of glory? Is it what the disciples heard? I have my doubts.

What I hear—what I think Jesus intended his disciples to hear—is the assurance that, even in his absence, Jesus will be thinking of his disciples. And more than just thinking about them, he will be actively at work in their behalf. He will be getting a place ready for them “in my Father’s house.” And they need not concern themselves about whether or not there will be room for them; for “in my Father’s house are many mansions.” There is plenty of room—*lots and lots* of it. There will be space aplenty for each of them. They will not be forgotten and left out.

“I will come again, and receive you unto myself.”⁹

Jesus and the disciples will live at the same address in “Father’s [expansive] house.” They will live together once more, though even more intimately. And when it’s time for them to move in, Jesus will personally escort them to their roomy abode and welcome them with the same open arms as he has always held out to them during his earthly ministry.

“The works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do.”¹⁰

“If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”¹¹

The disciples need not worry about their capacity without him. Though absent, Jesus will continue his work. With him working with them from his privileged place with Father, they will, in fact, fare, unimaginably, even better than they have during his earthly ministry.

“He shall give you another Comforter.”¹²

“Another” Comforter seems to suggest that they already have a Comforter. The one he is sending is in addition to the first. And of course, they have had a comforter. For the past

⁹ 14.³

¹⁰ 14.¹²

¹¹ 14.¹⁴

¹² 14.¹⁶

three years Jesus has constantly acted in this very role of comforter. How often has he comforted them in moments of doubt and concern! How often has he guided them, protected them, defended them. Though absent, Jesus will see that they have one who acts as helpfully and comfortingly in their lives as he always has.

As the Greek word, *Paracletos*, implies, this comforter will play numerous roles in their lives, just as Jesus has. He will serve as guide, counselor, advocate, protector, and defender.

“I will not leave you comfortless.”¹³

The word translated as “comfortless,” literally means, “orphaned.” We could read this to mean, simply, that they will not be abandoned, left alone. This would, in itself, be a source of great comfort. But with all the talk of “Father,” especially in what follows, one senses that Jesus is promising, and in some way initiating, a relationship between ourselves and his Father.¹⁴

“My Father will love [you], and we will come unto [you], and make our abode with [you].”¹⁵

This incredible promise has often been overlaid with all sorts of expectations—often technical, filled with mystery. Fair enough. But, again, I want to read this in the spirit of Jesus comforting and encouraging very anxious disciples. As if it were not enough that Jesus would continue to minister in their lives, he promises that the Father would become an intimate part of their lives.

“The Comforter...shall... bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”¹⁶

¹³ 14.¹⁸

¹⁴ We remember Paul’s contention that long before the world was, Father made the decision to “adopt” us as “children by Jesus Christ to himself” (“Eph. 1:5). There are many aspects to this. One, for example, is that the world “hates us.” In hating us, it dismisses us, abandons its commitment to us. We are orphaned. But not to worry, there is a better parent than those who generate us. There is a better parent than the world could ever hope to be.

¹⁵ 14.²³

¹⁶ 14.²⁶

If we think like the disciples, we are wondering how long it will be before Jesus returns. Will it be many years? Will it even be in the next life? What will the many years of absence do to our memory? Will his face fade in our minds? Will we remember the sound of his voice? Will we remember what we have heard from his own lips? What a comfort to know that he has made arrangements, and has provided a helper so that we will be able to recall such wonders and joys in his absence.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.”¹⁷

Wonder of wonders! He is not at all interested in our simply *not* being sad and lonely. He has planned for more than an absence of negation. He will leave us with the sort of peace that we have seen him experience at all times. We have seen how unaffected he was in the midst of a tempest. We have seen him calm and serene in the face of opposition from all sides. We have seen him calmly face death without flinching. And now, he tells us, this same peace will enter us. Oh yes, wonder of wonders indeed!

That the love wherewith thou has loved me may be in them

Well, we could go on and on. That is only a sampling of just one chapter. We could walk through chapters fifteen and sixteen and find this same Jesus, a true friend, comforting, encouraging, and strengthening his fragile disciples. I would encourage the reader to do so on their own. Look at all the ways Jesus seeks to comfort his disciples.

But this is not all. The reader should also understand, believe, and act upon the truth that these words are as much for us as for them. In his great intercessory prayer found in John 17, Jesus will request that his Father honor the comfort and promises that Jesus has uttered over the last hours. As part of that amazing prayer, Jesus will pray thus:

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.”¹⁸

¹⁷ 14.²⁷

¹⁸ 17.²⁰

That's you and me he's talking about!

The hope, the promise, the power, the comfort, the remembrances, the peace, and all the rest that was promised to the disciples become *OUR* heritage. It is the inheritance, both in life and in death of us who believe the promises made by this Publisher of peace, this Bringer of good tidings of good, this Publisher of salvation.

“Oh how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that is the founder of peace, yea, even the Lord.”¹⁹

Every promise, every comforting word has made our hearts burn. They have fulfilled their purpose. They have comforted us. We are hardly prepared for; we can hardly comprehend the scope of Jesus' final words—his final request. They are too big for our finite minds.

“I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: *that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them.*”²⁰

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹⁹ Mosiah 15.¹⁸

²⁰ 17.²⁶