

BECAUSE I LIVE

John 14:18-24

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“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (Jn. 14:16-17).

Of all the promises of Jesus Christ, one that is most precious to me is not even recorded in any of the Gospels. Instead, it comes from the Old Testament, although Hebrews 13:5 attributes it to Christ, who promises: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Dt. 31:6; Jos. 1:5). On many occasions when I felt alone, unworthy, or defeated, I have retreated into this promise for shelter and strength: Jesus will never leave or forsake me!

The Puritan Thomas Watson described all of Christ’s promises as “the water of life to renew fainting spirits.” He said that “as in the ark manna was laid up, so promises are laid up in the ark of Scripture.”¹ Thus as we study and come to know Christ’s promises, and then as our hearts feed upon this manna for faith, we are sustained, renewed, strengthened and comforted from fear.

Given their power, it is not surprising that Jesus’ farewell discourse was filled with promises. Jesus promised to make a home for his followers in heaven, to return for them in due time, to answer their prayers, and to strengthen them by sending the Holy Spirit. In John 14:18-24, Jesus heaps on four more precious promises. Together they address the problem of his soon departure with promises regarding *what* Christ will do, *when* he will do it, *how* it will happen, and *why* it is given to believers. At the heart of these promises is one that seals

¹ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 36.

Christ's ability to fulfill them all: "Because I live," Jesus assured his disciples, "you also will live" (Jn. 14:19).

A SOLUTION PROMISED

As Jesus prepared to depart from his disciples, he summoned one of the most heart-wrenching images to capture their fears: "I will not leave you as orphans," he said (Jn 14:18). Orphans are perhaps the world's most destitute class of people, lacking even the love and care of family. This is why photographs of orphaned children pull at the heart and gain sympathy from virtually everyone.

Jesus stood on the very brink of the cross, when he would hang alone in contempt and agony before the hatred of the world. He was about to be forsaken, yet his concern focused on the disciples and how they would feel abandoned when their Master was cruelly slain. Their disappointment would be summed up by the words of the downcast disciples Jesus would later meet on the road out of town: "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk. 24:20-21). Jesus knew that his closest disciples would especially feel abandoned and lost after he died, as alone in the world as helpless orphans.

This forlornment is often felt by followers when their leader dies or departs. Plato said, for instance, that when the great philosopher Socrates died, his disciples "thought that they would have to spend the rest of their lives forlorn, as children bereft of a father, and they did not know what to do about it."² Therefore, seeking to strengthen them for the coming dark hours, Jesus had a promise: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (Jn. 14:18). He promised to come to his disciples in their need, taking them swiftly back under the wings of his care so they would not wander lost as orphans in the world. Earlier, Jesus had promised great things to his disciples: after going to heaven he would return for them, and while he was gone he would answer their prayers and send the Holy Spirit. But here was a promise more tangible and direct, certain to address the immediate need of those who relied on him: "I will come to you" (Jn 14:18).

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:196.

THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES PROMISED

In a passage of great promises, the first promise is foundational, stating clearly the *what* of Jesus' provision for his disciples. But this leads to some vital questions, the first of which is *when*? Jesus said that he would come, so when would that take place?

Scholars have disputed the answer to this "when" question. Some argue that Jesus referred to his Second Coming, noting that this section began with a promise of his return at the end of the age (see Jn. 14:3). Another view sees this promise as signaling the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, since the surrounding verses speak very definitely about the coming Holy Spirit. The previous verses state, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 14:16-17). Both of these blessed events are occasions when Jesus promised to come to his disciples in need.

Nonetheless, the best understanding of Jesus' "when" promise is that he refers to his appearances to the disciples after his resurrection from the grave, an event that would happen in a few days. Jesus says that his coming is in "a little while" and that it will follow his removal from the world's sight: "Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me" (Jn. 14:19). That statement was fulfilled in the death and burial of Jesus, followed by his resurrection and appearances to the disciples, producing the very result Jesus cites here, that the disciples would finally comprehend who he was in relation to the Father. Speaking to the disciples on Thursday night, knowing that he would be taken from them and crucified on Friday, Jesus looked ahead to the first Easter Sunday and said, "You will see me." The Greek word here for "see" is *theoreo*, which means a seeing of perception: "You will perceive me," Jesus meant.

What a difference it made to the disciples when Jesus appeared among them in his resurrected body, displaying his wounds, inviting them to touch him, and even eating a fish to prove that he was really alive (Lk. 24:39-43). Jesus invited Thomas to place his fingers in Jesus' side and hands to enable him to believe (Jn. 20:27), prompting the model profession of faith: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn. 20:28). Having seen Jesus in the flesh, the same Peter who denied him before

his trial was emboldened to proclaim his resurrection in the first Christian sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:23-24). What a difference Christ's post-resurrection appearances made in the lives of the disciples: this was when he came to them so that they would know themselves not forsaken.

But there is more to Jesus' coming than his resurrection, for another result was the disciples' own spiritual resurrection. This interpretation is demanded by Jesus' statement that "because I live, you also will live" (Jn. 14:19). Having risen from the grave in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave spiritual life that enabled the disciples to see him with eyes of faith. The principle in this promise may be applied to the whole range of our salvation. Because Jesus rose in resurrection life, he will raise our bodies into resurrection glory and he now grants spiritual life to those who belong to him. "Because I live," he assures us, "you also will live" (Jn. 14:19). "His resurrection is the guarantee that they will not be overcome by death. His life means life for them (cf. 6:57)."³

The immediate result of Jesus' resurrection was that the disciples would perceive, as Jesus put it, "that I am in my Father" (Jn. 14:20). This shows that Christ's resurrection life imparts faith in him. The disciples' failure to understand the meaning of the cross highlighted their need for a spiritual resurrection of their own. The same is true for each of us. It is only when Christ grants us his resurrection life that we understand the truth about him and respond in faith, joyfully trusting him for our salvation. This granting of spiritual life from God is called our new birth, which precedes and causes faith (Jn. 3:3).

The result of our new life is our initial, saving knowledge of Jesus. Here, Jesus says that they will know that he is in the Father. Later, Jesus says we will grow in our personal knowledge of him as he manifests himself, but at first we gain the perception that he is who he said he is. It was because of Christ's unbreakable unity with the Father as the divine Son that death could not conquer him. For while he died in his human nature, his divine nature – eternally joined in being with God the Father – was incapable of dying. This saving

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 579.

deity is what we know when we first believe: “that I am in my Father.”

Jesus comes to us today in the gospel message and in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. When he calls us to new life and faith, we too are brought into saving union with God’s eternal life. Thus, when we come to know that Christ is one with the Father, we also realize that “this union is in turn the pattern for the relationship between Christ and his followers.”⁴ Jesus says in full, “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (Jn. 14:20). This is why Christians will live forever: not because we have become intrinsically immortal ourselves, independent of Christ, and certainly not because we have ourselves become divine, but because we are joined to the eternal life of the incarnate Son of God – as Paul put it, God “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5) – and because he will live forever. The writer of Hebrews celebrates his reign, saying, “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain...; you are the same, and your years will have no end” (1:10-12). Through our bond of faith with him, Christ has granted us resurrection life so that we will live and reign with him forever, beginning at the moment of our new birth into saving faith.

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST PROMISED

Jesus has promised the disciples that they will not be left as orphans, and that his renewed fellowship with them will begin after his resurrection. These were his promises in answer to the questions of *what* and *when*? This raises another question: *how* will the disciples, after the resurrection, grow in their knowledge of Jesus? His answer is that having begun our new life by knowing that Jesus is who he said he is, we grow in our knowledge of him personally through a life of love for him that obeys his commands. “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me,” Jesus said.

This is the second time in this farewell discourse that Jesus has emphasized obedience to his commands. The first was in verse 15:

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 280.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Here is sufficient proof to refute the idea that Christians, having been saved by faith alone, need not obey. To be sure, a cold, outward, or proud adherence to the Bible is not true obedience, since only love is able to keep Christ’s commands. Yet Jesus maintains that one who truly loves him will obey his Word. Alexander Maclaren wrote: “There are two motives for keeping commandments – one because they are commanded, and one because we love Him that commands. The one is slavery and the other is liberty. The one is like the Arctic regions, cold and barren, the other is like tropical lands, full of warmth and sunshine, glorious and glad fertility.”⁵ Real and living Christianity always involves a free and happy obedience out of love for Jesus.

Jesus’ point was not merely to repeat his teaching on obedience, however, but rather to show that it is by this loving obedience that believers come to know him better. The first reason for this is that an obedient life pleases our heavenly Father: Jesus said, “he who loves me will be loved by my Father” (Jn. 14:21). This does not mean that we earn God’s love by loving Jesus. The whole New Testament emphasizes that we are saved because “God so loved the world” (Jn. 3:16). In his first epistle, John reminds us that “we love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). Here is where an older distinction is helpful, between God’s love of compassion, whereby he sent his Son to die for our sins, and God’s love of complacency, and old term that means his pleasure and delight in the love and obedience of his people. This is why obedience to God’s Word always results in spiritual blessing, not merely because God’s Word is right and good but also because God sovereignly blesses obedience. Just as the Father was well pleased with the obedience of his Son, so he is also pleased when we glorify his Son through loving obedience.

The second reason that obedience yields increased knowledge of Christ is explained in yet another promise: “he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (Jn. 14:21). The word for “manifest” occurs seldom in the Bible, normally referring to a vivid display of divine glory. It was the word used by Moses in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when he

⁵ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 11:347.

pleaded with God for a visible display of his deity (Ex. 33:13). In the years that followed his resurrection, as the disciples poured out their lives in faithful service as apostles, Jesus appeared to them many times, giving them encouragement, further revelation, and strength to endure. He did not leave them as orphans, and not only appeared to them after his resurrection, but manifested himself to them for increasing knowledge in years to come.

How does this promise apply to us today? Jesus is saying that he will respond to our obedience by making himself increasingly real to us. He does not manifest himself bodily, having ascended into heaven, and nothing in the Bible encourages us to expect visions. Instead, Christ will make himself real to us and manifest his glory in the Bible and through the Holy Spirit's witness to Scripture in the hearts of those who love and obey Jesus. Jesus mentions his Word four times in verses 21-24, making clear that those who seek him out in Scripture will be given an increased knowledge of Jesus through his Word.

This teaching is vitally important for Christians. Notice that Jesus does not prescribe a life of monastic seclusion that will enable us to know him better. Jesus does not send us to some mountain top away from life that we might see his glory. Instead, he calls us to a lifestyle of loving obedience in which we will increasingly know him as the Father responds in pleasure and as Christ reveals his glory in the Word. Paul expressed our duty in these classic terms: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:19-20). Notice that we walk with Christ and grow in knowledge while living "in the flesh" – that is, in our normal earthly life – as we lovingly obey him in our jobs, homes, families, marriages, and communities.

If you are a new or young believer, this highlights the importance that you start following Christ sincerely, applying his teaching in the Bible to your daily life. We are not merely to learn his teaching but also to put it into practice. We are to pray and take an interest in the salvation of others, we are to love others and pursue personal holiness. In this way, obeying Jesus out of love for him, he promises to disclose his glory increasingly as we walk with him in faith.

This teaching is equally important for many who have long called themselves Christians. James Boice comments:

Many Christians would be willing to do spectacular things if by that means they could come to know Christ better. But they are unwilling to do the commonplace things that are involved in simple obedience. Will you do them? If you will, you will most certainly grow in God's grace. If you obey, Christ will increasingly unveil his heart to you.⁶

If we find that our relationship with Christ has dulled, it is probably because we have turned our passions back to the world, ceased our hunger for biblical truth, and settled for the initial spiritual gains of our first days as a Christian. Dry-souled and barren-hearted Christians should be motivated to renew their passion for Christ by his promise to respond with a greater knowledge of him and display of his glory.

COMMUNION WITH GOD PROMISED

We remember that this chain of promises began with Jesus' teaching of *what* he will do – not leave us as orphans – then *when* he will come – to the disciples after the resurrection and to us in our new birth – and then *how* we will enjoy this fellowship with him – through his increased disclosure as we love him and obey his commands. The passage concludes with Jesus' answer to a question that came from Judas – not Judas Iscariot but Judas the son of James (Lk. 6:16), also known as Thaddeus (Mk. 3:18) – regarding *why*: “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” (Jn. 14:22). This question revealed Judas' confusion regarding Christ's saving work, thinking it would be better for Jesus to display his glory before the world, perhaps recalling the ways that God awed pharaoh and Israel with visual displays during the exodus.

Jesus answered with a promise that clarifies God's intentions in saving his people. He said, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn. 14:23). Here we find that Jesus' plan to be with us involves the fulfillment of God's ancient purpose: to make his home in the hearts of those who love him and keep his

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1145.

Word. God's plan never envisioned winning over a hard-hearted, unbelieving world with overwhelming audiovisual displays. Rather, he planned to redeem a people for himself, who by his grace and by the power he would work in them would love him in holiness so that he might dwell in them in love. Paul stated this, saying that Christ "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Tit. 2:14).

Within such a people, chosen by God's sovereign election, bought by Christ's atoning blood, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, both Father and Son design to come and "make our home with him." So far from being forsaken or orphaned, those who receive the gospel in faith, loving Jesus and obeying God's commands, will become, individually and together with the church, a holy temple in which God will dwell (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:21-22). In this way, both God and his people begin now a communion of love that anticipates the glorious communion he has prepared for eternity: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev 21:3). The chief blessing that God can give is himself, and the purpose of our redemption is that he might be glorified in us as we enjoy communion with him by the Spirit and through the Word as God dwells in our hearts.

BECAUSE HE LIVES

At the heart of this great series of promises is Jesus' claim and pledge, "Because I live, you also will live" (Jn 14:19). This suggests that there are two kinds of Christians. There are those who live as if Christ is alive and those for whom Jesus is little more than a figurehead for their religion. Which one are you? Christians who realize that Jesus is now living at the right hand of God and that we can know him better will make this privilege the overriding passion of their lives. We still have to do our jobs, raise our children, and engage in all manner of worldly activities. But all will be done unto our living and present Lord, who loved us and calls us into love for him. Such Christians will seek to please Jesus rather than the world; they will want to be close to Jesus rather than sinful pleasures.

They will live by his strength and not by their own resources or by the power of the world. The Bible will be for them a living book of communion, in which they hear the voice of Christ, on the pages of which his glory and grace are manifested to our souls.

Other Christians – nominal Christians, even if their profession of faith is biblical – will live as if Jesus is not alive or present. Their concern is what they can get from their faith rather than the giving of themselves through it. Their delight is found in the things of this world, the will of which they find it hard to refuse. If they read the Bible, they do so out of cold duty, learning facts but not hearing the voice of Christ. So on it goes, with prayer, worship, and other Christian duties: all is Arctic frost or at least a Midwestern chill.

If any of this describes you, then listen to Jesus: he says, “Because I live, you also will live” (Jn. 14:19). Not only will you live after you die, but through communion with the living Christ you will experience the life he gives now. Come to him, seek him, ask him to make himself real to your faith. Seek him in his Word, love him by obeying his commands, and remember that those who are faithful in little things are always entrusted with more (Mt. 25:21).

Lastly, if you are not a believer in Christ, then the last verse was written for you. Jesus said, “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” Your indifference to Christ’s gospel and your neglect of his commands reveal a cold heart towards the Son of God and Savior. He adds, “And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (Jn. 14:24). Will you not seek the life that Jesus gives, and will you not accept the message that he brings from God the Father? The danger is that once you have turned away, you, like the men who crucified him, may see Jesus no more (Jn. 14:19). Yet he offers you salvation now, offering to be with you always, conquering sin and death by his atoning blood, and living in you by the Holy Spirit he sends. Isn’t this more than the world can offer you? Jesus lives forever, whether you believe or not. But if you believe, giving your love to Jesus Christ, by his life you will have life forever. He says, “Because I live, you will also live,” starting right now.