

THE BASIC THOUGHT OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

by Witness Lee

The Gospel of John is constructed in a certain historical sequence, especially with respect to eternity. The other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are not arranged in this way. John's Gospel has the best historical arrangement, for it starts from the beginning in eternity past, and it continues indefinitely into the future. Even after the last chapter, the record of this Gospel is not finished, for the history recorded in it has no end.

John's record reveals how God comes into man and brings man into Himself. Hence, in this book there is the coming and going of the wonderful Christ. By His coming He brought God into man to live as a man on this earth, and by His going He brought man into God, causing man to be one with God and enabling man to live in God. This is the content of this Gospel. The Gospel of John is a record of these two main items—the coming and going of this wonderful One.

The Gospel of John is divided into two main sections. The first section is composed mostly of the first twelve chapters and shows how Christ came through incarnation to bring God into man. This is His coming. The second part, chapters 14 through 21, unveils how Christ went through death and resurrection to bring man into God. This is His going. Chapter 13 is a turning point that divides the book into two parts. In order to understand the second section, we must know the first section. If we are going to understand His going, we must know His coming.

Christ Coming through Incarnation to Bring God into Man

John 1 starts from the very beginning, that is, from eternity past. This wonderful One in eternity past was the Word, God Himself (v. 1). At a certain point He created the heavens and the earth, and following creation He came in incarnation to be a man in time and lived on this earth (vv. 3, 14). Then the Lord unveiled the kingdom with its requirements, He exposed the real condition of the fallen race, and He manifested His all-sufficiency. From chapter 3 through chapter 11, there are nine cases in which, on the one hand, man's condition is thoroughly exposed, and on the other hand, Christ's all-sufficiency is fully applied to meet the need of every man's case.

The first case is one of regeneration in life, related to Nicodemus (2:23—3:36). In the second case the Lord talked with a Samaritan woman (4:1-42). The first case deals with a good man, whereas the second case concerns an immoral woman. The third case is related to the need of the dying (vv. 43-54), and following this is the record of an impotent man who had been sick for thirty-eight years (ch. 5). Although the sick man knew what to do, he lacked the strength to do it, being weak to the uttermost.

Christ's intention in coming to the earth was not to come to the earth as a place but to come into man. Christ's going was not a matter of bringing us to another, better, place. His going was to bring us into another person.

The next case is related to a hungry crowd around the sea (ch. 6). The sea signifies a situation in which there is no peace and no satisfaction, in which people are hungry and troubled all the time. The Lord Jesus is the only one who can satisfy our hunger and calm the storm. Therefore, we must eat Him and receive Him into our boat. Following this, John 7 gives us a picture of thirsty people. To be thirsty is more serious than to be hungry. The Lord Jesus is the only one who can afford us the living word to quench our thirst.

The seventh case tells us of a guilty, dirty, and sinful woman, who was caught in adultery (7:53—8:59). Here, Christ is the One who is able to forgive, deliver, and release people from the bondage of sin. The eighth case concerns a man who was born blind (ch. 9). Although we are born in darkness, Christ is the One who is the light of life. The last case involves Lazarus, who died and was buried (ch. 11). In this situation the Lord is the resurrection life. The final need of man in the first section of John's Gospel is resurrection. We are not only sinful and blind but dead. Therefore, we need the resurrection life. If we look into these nine cases, we can realize that they give us a full picture of man's condition and need and of how Christ is the all-sufficient One, who meets the need of man's every case.

Then after the case of resurrection, we come to chapter 12. Because Christ manifested Himself as such a wonderful One, many people came to Him and warmly welcomed Him. However, He told them that He, as the one grain of wheat, had to die in order to be multiplied as the many grains (v. 24). All the foregoing events were His coming to bring God into man to meet all of man's needs. Now at the end of His coming He declared that He needed to go by death and resurrection for the purpose of multiplication. This is the first main section of the Gospel of John.

A Turning Point

John 13 is a pivotal chapter in this book. This chapter is very wonderful. We should not understand it as merely a chapter on foot-washing. It is not that simple; rather, it is very deep. In this crucial chapter as the turning point of this book, the Lord did one main thing; that is, He washed the disciples' feet. He did not wash other parts but only their feet, the part that is constantly in contact with the earth. This was to cleanse them of their earthly touch. Although it is easy to become dirty by the earthly touch, the Lord has a way to cleanse us.

Christ Going through Death and Resurrection to Bring Man into God

After washing His disciples' feet, the Lord told them that He was going to leave them (v. 33). The disciples were bothered and grieved when they heard that this wonderful One was going to leave (vv. 36-37). Following this, John 14 begins the second main section of this Gospel.

Christ's coming and going are matters not of places but of persons. Christ's intention in coming to the earth was not to come to the earth as a place but to come into man. He was incarnated to live not on the earth, strictly speaking, but in man. Man, the person, is the focus. If Christ were not in man, He would not have lived on this earth. Christ's coming was to be in man.

In principle, it is the same with His going. Christ's going was not a matter of bringing us to another, better, place. His going was to bring us into another person. We must be clear about this basic concept. Christ's going was not to bring us to heaven; it was to bring us into another, wonderful, person, the divine person, God the Father Himself. Just as His coming was to bring God not merely to the earth but into man, so His going was to bring us not to heaven but into God. If Christ desired to bring us into heaven, He Himself

would have to remain in heaven, but at the end of the Gospel of John this wonderful Christ is not only in the heavens but in and with His disciples on the earth (ch. 21).

The Many Abodes in the Father's House

John 14:1 says, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe into God, believe also into Me." It is rather difficult for us to understand what is meant by "believe into God, believe also into Me." This word signifies that Christ is one with God, and He is God. If we believe in God, we must know that the Lord Jesus is God and that He is one with God. Here the Lord seemed to be saying, "Since you know that I am one with God, you should not be troubled by My going."

The Father's House Being the Habitation of God among His People

The Lord continued in verse 2, "In My Father's house are many abodes." What is the Father's house? Some say that this refers to heaven. Even J. N. Darby, one of the great Bible teachers, taught in this way. However, we must follow the principle that the Scripture must be interpreted by its own words. In the Gospel of John the phrase *My Father's house* is used twice. The first time it appears is in 2:15-16, which says, "Having made a whip out of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, as well as the sheep and the oxen, and He poured out the money of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. And to those who were selling the doves He said, Take these things away from here; do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise." Since *My Father's house* in chapter 2 refers to the temple, could the same term refer to heaven in chapter 14? This is not the proper, logical way to interpret the Scriptures. The Father's house does not refer to heaven.

Many Christians expect to go to heaven, using mainly John 14 as their basis. They say that according to verse 2, a wonderful mansion is prepared for us in heaven. For two thousand years the work has been going on and still has not been finished; therefore, they say, "How wonderful that mansion will be!" At least one Christian hymn tells us that of all the mansions prepared in the heavens, there is one for me. According to the Gospel of John itself, however, there are no such mansions. The mansions in heaven are merely of people's imagination.

The correct meaning of *My Father's house* is that it is the very habitation of God among His people on this earth. The principle of the temple is that on this earth among God's people there is a dwelling place for God. Verse 19 in chapter 2 says, "Jesus answered and said to them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Although the Jewish people destroyed "this temple," the Lord raised it up in three days. *This temple* refers to the Lord's physical body, which He raised in three days (v. 21). However, according to 1 Peter 1:3, all the believers were regenerated through the resurrection of Christ, and Ephesians 2:5-6 says that we were made alive together with Christ and raised up together with Him. Therefore, we also were raised up on the third day in resurrection. Christ not only raised up Himself, but He also included all His believers in His resurrection. Therefore, after Christ's resurrection, God's temple is no longer Christ Himself alone. It includes all His members, His people, as His corporate Body. This is the temple, and this is the house of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 1 Tim. 3:15). It is also God's habitation (Eph. 2:21-22) and "My Father's house." Strictly speaking, the Father's house is the church, which was raised up in Christ's resurrection.

The Many Abodes Being Persons, Not Places

By comparing the uses of the word *abode* throughout the same Gospel, we can arrive at its proper meaning. The King James Version renders the word *abodes* in John 14:2 as "mansions," but this is a poor translation. In verse 23 the Lord Jesus said, "If anyone

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loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make an abode with him." In Greek the singular word *abode* in verse 23 is *mone*, the same word translated by some in the plural as "mansions" in verse 2. Moreover, the verb form of this word, *meno*, is found in 15:4, which says, "Abide in Me and I in you."

The correct usage of *abode* is found in 14:23, which says that if someone loves the Son, the Father and the Son will come to him and make an abode with him. To be sure, the abode mentioned here is a matter of persons, not a place. How then can the same word refer to persons in verse 23 and to heavenly mansions in verse 2? This is not a sound interpretation.

The many "mansions" are in actuality many abodes. In the Father's house, which is the temple, there are many members, and every member is an abode. This thought is very deep. In John 14 the Lord was about to die and resurrect, and by His death and resurrection He made us all a part of the temple, which is the Father's house. Before His death, we were simply the old man, having nothing to do with God's temple. However, through His death and resurrection we were made a part of, that is, members of, this temple.

Bringing the Disciples into the Father, Where Christ Is

John 14:2-3 says, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again." The King James Version translates the Greek for *I am coming again* as "I will come again," and some interpret this to refer to the Lord's second coming. If we are not clear about the grammatical construction of verse 3, we cannot properly understand it. This verse does not say that Christ will come but that He is coming, indicating that His going was His coming.

Perhaps none of us have ever said, "If I go, I am coming"; apparently, this is a peculiar construction. However, while the Lord was going, He was coming. According to the concept of the Gospel of John, the Lord's going was His dying. The Lord was saying, "If I go to die, I am coming back." Clearly then, His coming back refers to His resurrection. In the evening of the day of resurrection, Christ came back to His disciples.

Verse 3 continues, "I am coming again and will receive you to Myself." This verse says that He would receive the disciples not into the heavens but to Himself. Even at the very time that the Lord was speaking to the disciples, they were still not in Him. Rather, they were outside of Him. Now the Lord was going to do something to bring them into Himself. This is the proper meaning of this verse. Jesus was going to do something to enable Him to receive them into Himself.

Verses 3 through 6 continue, "So that where I am you also may be. And where I am going you know the way. Thomas said to Him, Lord, we do not know where You are going; how can we know the way? Jesus said to him, I am the way and the reality and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me." Our thought may have been that no one comes to heaven except through Jesus, but this verse says that the One to whom we come is the Father.

Verses 10 and 11 say, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if not, believe because of the works themselves." At that time, where was the Lord? Jesus did not say, "I am in heaven." Rather, He said, "I am in the Father." Moreover, in verse 3 He said, "Where I am you also may be." The Lord was about to do something to bring the disciples to the Father, where He was.

Then in verses 16 through 18 Jesus said, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever, even the Spirit of reality, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him; but you know Him, because He abides with you and shall be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you.” “I am coming to you” is different from “I will come to you,” as the King James Version says. The former indicates that while the Lord was speaking this word, He was already on the way; He was already coming.

The Lord Coming on “That Day,” the Day of Resurrection

In verses 19 and 20 the Lord went on to say, “Yet a little while and the world beholds Me no longer, but you behold Me; because I live, you also shall live. In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.” “That day” is the day of resurrection, not the day of His second coming in the future.

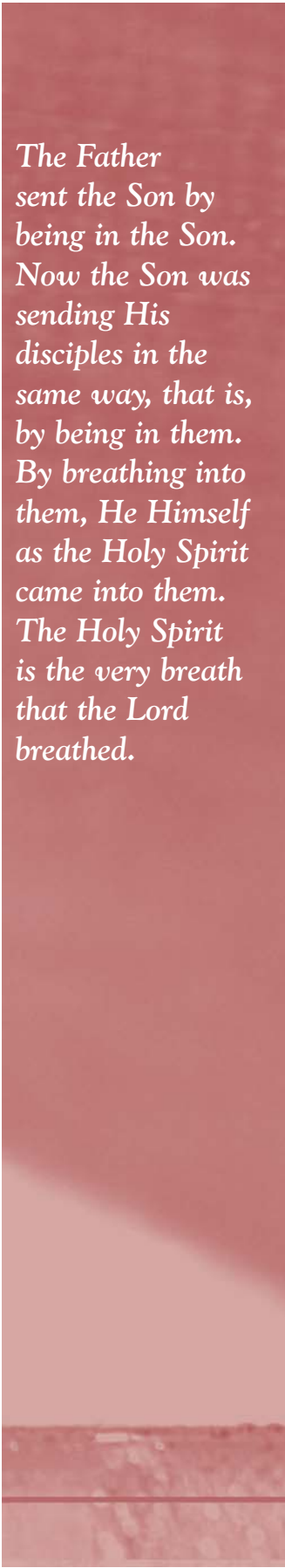
To understand the meaning of *that day*, it is sufficient to look at other passages in this same Gospel. John 16:16-17 says, “A little while and you no longer behold Me, and again a little while and you will see Me. Some of His disciples then said to one another, What is this that He says to us, A little while and you do not behold Me, and again a little while and you will see Me; and, Because I am going to the Father?” In verses 20 through 23 Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she gives birth, has sorrow because her hour has come; but when she brings forth the little child, she no longer remembers the affliction because of the joy that a man has been born into the world. Therefore you also now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you. And in that day you will ask Me nothing.” The disciples wept and lamented at the time the Lord was crucified, but their sorrow was turned into joy when the child was delivered on “that day,” the day of resurrection. The disciples were then like a woman travailing in birth, and Christ was the child to be brought forth in His resurrection (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; Rom. 1:4).

John 20 also speaks of “that day.” Verses 19 and 20 say, “When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and while the doors were shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said to them, Peace be to you. And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced at seeing the Lord.” This portion of the Scriptures is the fulfillment of the word spoken by the Lord in chapters 14 through 16. The Lord came back on “that day,” the day of resurrection.

Christ in Resurrection Breathing into and Remaining in the Disciples

Sending the Disciples by Being in Them: John 20:21 says, “Then Jesus said to them again, Peace be to you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” In what way did the Father send the Son? The Father sent the Son by being in the Son. Now the Son was sending His disciples in the same way, that is, by being in them. Therefore, verse 22 continues, “When He had said this, He breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit.” By breathing into them, He Himself as the Holy Spirit came into them. The Holy Spirit is the very breath that the Lord breathed. The Lord seemed to be saying, “I send you by breathing into you. This is the way that the Father sent Me; He sent Me with Himself. When I was sent by the Father, I had the Father within Me, and He was one with Me. Now I send you in the same way; that is, I am entering into you to be one with you.” After He said this, He breathed the Holy Spirit into them. That breath was simply Christ Himself.

Remaining with the Disciples in a Mysterious, Wonderful Way: After saying this, the



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record in John 20 does not say that the Lord Jesus left the disciples. This portion of the word tells us three times that He came (vv. 19, 24, 26), but not once do chapters 20 or 21 say that Jesus left the disciples. Rather, He remained in them as the living breath. Therefore, wherever they were, He also was there. If they were in the room, He also was in the room. If they were at the seashore, He too was at the seashore (ch. 21). It is not that the Lord left them but that He was either invisible or manifested. Even without appearing to manifest Himself, He was still there.

After His resurrection, Christ came to His disciples in order to come into them. This transpired while the doors and windows were closed because at that time the disciples were in fear of the Jews (20:19). Although the doors and windows of the room were shut, Jesus came in. It seems that He must have come as the Spirit, but He showed them His hands and His side (v. 20). This indicates that He still had a physical body. How could He with a physical body enter the room with the doors closed? This is something wonderful that is beyond our understanding. We cannot understand in a full way how He came, but the fact is that after He resurrected, He came back to the disciples. Moreover, there is no word here that tells us He left again. Rather, after He came, He remained there in a wonderful way. His coming, His presence, is very mysterious, wonderful, and beyond our understanding. We should not try to analyze it and understand it by our natural mentality; we should simply receive the word of John 20.

Coming as "Another Comforter"

In John 14:16 the Lord said that the Father would give the disciples another Comforter. Some Christian teachers say that this word was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). This is a wrong interpretation. Acts 2 refers to the baptism in the Spirit. On the day of resurrection the Lord breathed the Spirit into the disciples for their life, whereas on the day of Pentecost the Spirit as the rushing violent wind blew upon the disciples for power. These are two different aspects of the one Spirit. When the apostle John wrote his Gospel, he did not do so with Acts 2 in view. On the contrary, the Gospel of John is a complete book showing that the Triune God was incarnated to be a man, bringing Himself into man, mingling Himself with man, and living on the earth as a man. He went into death, and in resurrection He imparted Himself into man. Then through His resurrection and ascension He brought man into God. From this point on, God is in man and man is in God. He and man are one.

John 14:17 tells us that the Comforter was first with the disciples and then in them. By reading the following verses again and again, we can understand that the Spirit as "another Comforter" is none other than Christ Himself in another form. We must pay close attention to these verses. In verses 17 and 18 the Lord spoke of the Spirit of reality, saying, "He abides with you and shall be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you." From verse 17 to verse 18, the pronoun quickly changes from *He* to *I*. The very "He" who is the Spirit of reality in verse 17 becomes the very "I" who is the Lord Himself in verse 18. It is a matter of form; at that time the Lord was in the form of the flesh, but after His death and resurrection He was transfigured into the Spirit. We may illustrate this by water and vapor. Although water becomes vapor, the essence of the water is still the same; it is different only in form.

Before the Lord's death and resurrection He was a man in the flesh. In the form of the flesh, He could not enter into His disciples, so He had to be transformed, transfigured, into another form. After His death and resurrection He could enter into His disciples in a mysterious way, a way that we cannot understand in full. He came into the room with the doors closed, yet with a physical body; this is wonderful and mysterious. Now He was able to breathe Himself into His disciples. From that time forth the disciples had the Holy Spirit within them.

If the disciples did not have this wonderful Spirit within them, how could the one hundred twenty pray for ten days together in one accord (Acts 1:14)? Moreover, at that time in Jerusalem there was a strong threatening by the Jews. Whoever followed Jesus was persecuted, but these Galilean fishermen were not afraid. They gave up their homes and families in order to remain in Jerusalem. Then they stayed together and prayed for ten days in one accord, and Peter could even understand the prophecies of the Psalms (Acts 1:20). Who gave them this boldness and ability? It was the indwelling Spirit.

At the time of John 20, however, they had the indwelling Spirit, but they lacked the outpouring of the Spirit. They enjoyed the inward aspect but lacked the outward aspect. They drank of the Spirit within, yet they had no outward clothing, no uniform without. They needed the Spirit of power as the uniform in order to exercise authority. For this, they had to wait until the day of Pentecost. This is the second aspect of the Spirit; it is not the aspect that the Gospel of John reveals.

Christ's Coming and Going to Produce the Mutual Dwelling of God and Man

The Gospel of John reveals that the Father is in the Son, coming to be among humanity, and the Son became the Spirit to enter into humanity. His entering into man was accomplished by means of His going in death and His coming in resurrection. Christ's going was not to leave the disciples but a further step to come into them. By the first step of incarnation He came to be among them. After that, He needed to take another step to enter into them. Incarnation was the first step of His coming, and death and resurrection were the second step.

Apparently, Christ's death was His going, but actually, it was His coming. His going to die did not mean that He left the disciples. It only meant that He was taking another step to get into them. Therefore, the Lord could say, "If I go...I am coming" (14:3). He seemed to be saying, "Do not be sorrowful. Do not think that I am going to leave you. I have come to you, but at this time I am only among you. This is only the first step; I cannot yet enter into you. I must do something further so that I can be in you. I must take a further step to die and resurrect. After death and resurrection I will then be able to enter into you. Therefore, My going is My coming." For this reason, the Gospel of John does not say that after Christ died and resurrected, He left the disciples. Instead, it tells us that after He died and resurrected, He came to them and entered into them.

In verse 20 the Lord said, "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you," and in verse 3 He said, "Where I am you also may be." On "that day" the disciples would be where the Lord is. Where is the Lord? He is in the Father. Therefore, in that day they also would be in the Father. While the Lord was speaking this, they were not yet in the Father because Christ had not yet died and resurrected. The Lord was still in the form of the flesh. He needed to die and resurrect, and after His death and resurrection He was transfigured into the Spirit. Then at that time He was able to enter into the disciples. Since the Lord was in the Father and they were in Him, spontaneously they were also in the Father. It is in this way that the Lord brought them into the Father. Now where the Lord is, we are there also.

In this way God becomes our abode, and we become God's abode, so in the following chapter there is the mutual abiding. John 15:4 says, "Abide in Me and I in you." By His coming in incarnation, Christ brought God into man, and by His going through death and resurrection He brought man into God. Now God and man, man and God, become a mutual abode. We abide in God, and God abides in us. The way has been paved, and the fact has been accomplished. Now we simply enjoy this mutual abiding. Now, in the Father's house, that is, in the temple of God, the church, each one of us not only has a place, but each one of us is a "place." We not only have an abode; each one is an abode.

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When the Lord Jesus was on the earth, according to His divinity, He was in the Father. However, His humanity had not yet been transfigured to be in the Father. By passing through death and resurrection, His humanity was brought into His divinity.

In Revelation 21 and 22 it is difficult to see who the dwellers are in the New Jerusalem. The twelve apostles are not, strictly speaking, the dwellers there; they are the foundations. We may compare them to bricks in a building. We do not say that bricks dwell in the building; they are only part of the building. But in another sense, the building becomes the dwelling place of the bricks. Similarly, when we are built into the church, the building of God becomes our dwelling place. All the saved and redeemed ones are parts of the New Jerusalem. Who then is the dweller? It is the Triune God.

The Real Meaning of John 14 and 20

John 14 and 20 should now be very clear. At that time the Lord Jesus was able only to be among the disciples; He was not able to enter into them. Therefore, the Lord needed to die and resurrect, and in so doing, He was transfigured from the flesh into the Spirit, who is a wonderful person (1 Cor. 15:45). After His resurrection the Lord still had a physical body, yet it was wonderful and mysterious. On the day of resurrection He came to the disciples in this extraordinary way, not only to be with the disciples but also to enter into them as breath. He breathed into them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). Just as the Father sent the Son, the Lord was also in the disciples and one with them to send them.

After His death and resurrection the Lord Himself is not only in the Father but also in the disciples. Since the disciples are in the Lord, and the Lord is in the disciples, they are automatically in the Father. Therefore, where the Lord is, there the disciples are also. In this way the Lord brought them into God. Now everything has been accomplished. God is in man, and man is in God, so God and man become a mutual abode. God becomes our abode, and we become God's abode mutually. For this reason, John 15 continues with the Lord's word to abide in Him and He in us. This is the proper meaning of this portion of John.

Being in the Father but Going to the Father

On the one hand, John 14:10 tells us that the Lord is in the Father, and on the other hand, the Lord needed to go to the Father (vv. 12, 28). When the Lord Jesus was on the earth, according to His divinity, His inward essence, He was already in the Father. However, He also had another part, another nature—His humanity, which had not yet been transfigured to be in the Father. Therefore, He had to pass through death and resurrection. By passing through death and resurrection, His humanity was transfigured and brought into His divinity.

Knowing the Basic Thought of this Gospel and of the Entire New Testament

In order to understand the Gospel of John, we must be careful. We should not understand this portion of the Word by our human concept. This is a mistake made by so many Christian teachers. We have pointed out, for example, that many Christians teach that John 14 speaks about going to heaven, but this is inconsistent with the context of the entire Gospel of John. The context of this entire book tells us that God was first incarnated to be a man, and then He brought man into Himself by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Our intention in stressing this matter is not merely to adjust and correct the wrong teachings in Christianity. It is to see something subjective in life. We must realize that it is not the Lord's intention to prepare a place for us in the heavens and then one day to bring us there. This is not the thought of God. The thought of God today is to work Himself into us. We must realize how much we need to be wrought into God and have Christ wrought into us. May we all be clear that this is the basic thought of this Gospel and the basic thought of the entire New Testament. **AFC**