

## **“The Father’s House”**

**John 14:1-4**

**February 25, 2001**

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### **Text Comment**

- v.1     Though we have already read that the Lord’s heart was troubled in prospect of his suffering to come, he forgets himself and seeks to comfort his disciples who were troubled by the announcement just made concerning his imminent departure. These men had become followers of the Lord Jesus. They had “burned their bridges” so to speak. They had come to think of their lives completely in terms of their participation in the Lord’s program, *and now he tells them that he is leaving them!* Separation from the Lord had not been part of the plan!

In how many places in this Gospel has the Lord Jesus linked himself with the Father in heaven. To say in the same breath that they should trust the Father and him is one more claim that he is equal with the Father.

- v.3     There is a longstanding debate about the meaning of the word the NIV has translated, I think correctly, “rooms.” Part of the problem is that the word occurs only twice in the NT, here and in v. 23 of this same chapter, where the NIV translates it “home.” Literally the word means “abiding place” or “staying place.” It was translated in the old Latin Bible by the word “mansiones” which meant “halting places” or “lodging places” but which came into the KJV as “mansions.” When I was a boy we sang a chorus that went: “I’ve got a mansion, just over the hill-top, in that bright land where you never grow old, and some day yonder, I’ll never more wander, but walk the streets that are paved with gold.” But mansions is clearly not the right idea.

The result of the ambiguity of the word is that people have thought different things about what the Lord meant. Some have thought he is talking about “lodging” or “resting places” along the way of the Christian life in this world. He would then be saying that when he leaves the world, he will come back by his Holy Spirit to meet us along our way and lead us to the next resting place. Our sense of continuing fellowship with him will revive us on our journey. And, so, there will be many such resting places along our way in this world, every place where the Lord meets us and refreshes us. That interpretation seems far-fetched in view of the fact that the Lord would not likely describe this world as “my Father’s house.” Far more simple and straightforward an interpretation is the one that takes the Lord to be speaking of heaven when he speaks of his Father’s house and of his second coming at the end of the age to take his disciples to be with him in heaven. In that case, the word must mean “rooms” or “suites” as the NIV has it, because we are talking about places *within the Father’s house*. Of course, the point is not the nature of the room itself – as if we are to visualize long hallways with doorways on each side – but the fact that there is a place for the disciples in heaven. Jesus will see to it. And they, though separated for a time, will be with him at last and forever. The “many” rooms

indicates that there is room enough in heaven for all the redeemed, for all who trust in Christ.

- v.4 Thomas in the next verse is going to say that they *don't* know the way, but Jesus is saying that because they know *Him* they really do know the way, however confused they may be at the moment.

It was an arresting image that the Lord Jesus used to point the attention of his disciples forward to the second coming and the consummation of all things. He sought to put their minds at rest by telling them of what was in store for them in due time. He referred to heaven as “my Father’s house” and then said that there were places or rooms there for all who trust in and follow him.

Everyone knows what he meant. At the deepest level of recognition, we understand and appreciate the image. For house and home mean everything to us. Even those of us who have bad memories of growing up in our Father’s house have a dream of home, a longing for home, and know instinctively what the Lord meant when he spoke of his Father’s house and of our finding a place in it.

It has been a long time since I have lived in the home of my upbringing, but my memories of it are sharp and clear and warm and happy. That house is now the Francis Schaeffer Institute on the campus of Covenant Theological Seminary. The bedroom I shared with my brother, located in the daylight basement, is now an office. But I can still see myself there through the many years of my boyhood and young adulthood.

I can remember very clearly the first home that Florence and I shared, the upstairs flat of a small house in Aberdeen, Scotland. Little rooms, coal fireplaces, it was our home. And now we have lived in a house that has been the only home our children have ever known. We moved in just a few months before our eldest was born and we have lived there ever since. And all the memories that we have of our children and all their memories of childhood and youth are associated with that home.

We are fortunate to have a summer home – that is what we call it – in the mountains of Colorado. I went there in the summer for the first time when I was four years old and have gone there each summer ever since. In my youth I spent most of the summer there, two and a half months or so each year. Perhaps there have not been more than five summers that I have not spent time there. So I have consecutive memories of my entire life that are associated with that home. My children have followed me there and they too have memories of that home from every stage of their lives. I remember, as if it were yesterday, watching my father and mother drive away from our Colorado home, watching the car cross the valley, knowing that it was his last time, that he would never return to that mountain home he loved so much. Why does a memory stick like that? Because of the power that home has over our hearts, the precious associations that swirl around the houses where we lived with our parents where we grew up, where we ourselves grow old.

And I have memories of other homes as well. My first night ever in England was spent in a featherbed in an upstairs bedroom of Guessens, Mr. Ian Tait’s home, a house so ancient parts of

it went back to the Middle Ages. It had many rooms, did that home, and many people found a place there through the years. What have all these memories in common but that human love of home, of family, of belonging, of relationships so precious and founded so deep that we cannot conceive of our lives apart from them. That is home to us. And here our Savior is telling us that he has gone to prepare a place in our Father's house so that we can be there with him forever at home.

And you have like memories. We all know why the Lord chose the image of home, of a Father's house, where we would someday make our home. The interest isn't here, as it is sometimes in the Bible, to describe the grandeur of that house, but to evoke the atmosphere of a home where we will belong, where we will live with our Father and our Elder Brother in the tenderness and delight of home-bred love.

Think of these lines from old folk songs.

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,  
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.

Weep no more my lady. Oh! weep no more today,  
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,  
For the old Kentucky home far away.

Or these from great poets.

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn. [Keats]

I crown thee king of intimate delights.  
Fireside enjoyments, home-born happiness! [Cowper]

The sweetest sounds to mortals given  
Are found in Mother, Home, and Heaven. [Goldsmith]

Stay, stay at home my heart and rest.  
Home-keeping hearts are happiest. [Longfellow]

Elsewhere in the Bible heaven is depicted in different ways. But here in the Upper Room the Lord uses this powerfully emotive image common to all of human life: heaven is home, our Father's house, our Savior's home, and forever and forever it will be our home. Salvation at last is coming home. Think of the prodigal son. Someone has described each of the three stages of that parable in terms of home: first the prodigal was sick of home, then he was homesick, and, finally, he was home.

Heaven is what Christianity is all about. Without heaven it is all to no purpose. The covenant, the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit, it is all about how God brings us to heaven. Heaven stands at the end of it all as that to which everything points, from

which everything gets its meaning. And it is an indescribably rich vision we are given in the Bible of that final consummation and fulfillment of life that awaits all who are in Jesus Christ. There is the beatific vision, the drinking up of our souls in the glory of God. There is the heavenly city with its golden streets and its clear-flowing river. There is the great country with believers ruling over cities. There is the wedding feast with all of us sitting down at a great banquet. But here, heaven is simply home, a home we will never have to leave, a home that will be everything we know a home should be, everything and much much more that the best of our homes have ever been. Enter into the Lord's image, ponder and imagine. Sitting down with your Father in that dining room, to eat that food, and enjoy that conversation, and to know that it will only get more wonderful as time goes on. Never the shadow of death over that home!

It is interesting and surely revealing that in a day like ours, when the life of the home has been so severely disturbed, when so many people have sad, painful, and fearful memories of their own Father's houses, when homes have been broken in so many cases, an artist like the Christian painter Thomas Kinkade should have such an amazing success. He sells his prints by the thousands in America's malls. We might describe him as the artist of the home. So many of his paintings are idyllic scenes of sylvan cottages, really images of dreams of home as we imagine it, as we long for it to be. He is a modern Norman Rockwell, in fact cheerfully acknowledges his debt to Rockwell, and is not at all ashamed to list the themes that animate his art – themes to which, of course, the artists of the modern school and high culture cluck with condescending disdain – home, family, faith, beauty, a simple way of life. Home comes first in his list! [“The Kinkade Crusade,” *CT* (Dec. 4, 2000) 51]

Human beings long for home. Just as they long for life and can never make peace with the prospect of death, just as eternity has been written in their hearts, so has home. And what is heaven, Jesus is telling us here, but finally and at last the home for which all human beings long with an inconsolable longing.

Surely it is very interesting that the Lord, in comforting his disciples, does nothing more than simply offer this image of the father's house and of their being places there for them. He doesn't elaborate it at all. He doesn't explain it. He says that he is going *to prepare* a place for us, but he never tells us what that means. What does he do to prepare a place for us in the Father's house? What does that mean? I'm not sure. As one commentator put it, “We understand how men are prepared for the place; but not how the place is prepared for men.” [T.D. Bernard, cited in Morris, 639n.] Perhaps the Lord is making a general reference to everything that he will do during his session, his reign while seated at the Right Hand until his second coming, everything he will do to bring the final consummation to pass. But, the Lord doesn't explain. He is content simply to leave us with this single image of heaven as home and a most solemn promise that he will see to it that we make it home. *He doesn't have to elaborate the image because it is so powerful by itself.* But he does emphasize his promise. Indeed, he underscores this simple promise three times in rapid succession: 1) Trust in God and in me – surely you can count on us, he is saying, to tell you the truth. There will be a place for you in the Father's house! 2) If that were not the case, I would tell you. You men who have lived with me and walked with me over these past several years, surely you know that if this happy and consoling prospect were not real, I would tell you. I, of all men, the Son of Man, the Messiah, the Son of God, I would not lie to you about something as important and as sacred as this. And, then, 3) Surely, if I am leaving

*you precisely in order to prepare a place for you in the Father's house* you can count on my returning to take you there. *My work will not fail.* If my entire purpose is to ensure that you will be with me forever in our home in heaven, then, of course, it will be so.

And how those words must have come back to console and encourage and nerve the apostles later. The Christ who rose from the dead, the Christ whom they had seen with their own eyes ascend to heaven, the Christ concerning whom the angel had said he would return as he left the world, *that Christ* clearly is not going to fail in accomplishing all his will. And he said that he was leaving the world and then that he would return to the world with no other object in view but that he should have his disciples with him forever in his Father's house.

It can be very hard, while making our long pilgrimage through this vale of tears, it can be very hard to believe in something so wonderful as that we are very near to home, and to a home so perfectly home that we can hardly imagine how perfect. It can be very hard in this world of sin and death to believe that not so long from now we will step through the door into our Father's house and will be home at last.

The Lord knows precisely how hard it can be to believe that and to keep the prospect of it alive in the heart. And so he said not only that he would return to this world to take us home, but solemnly emphasized his promise by saying that if this were not true he would have told us. I love those words. Are there more consoling and comforting words in all the Bible than those. "If it were not so, I would have told you." And what is it that he has told us? That we are going home!

That was what the Lord thought his disciples needed to hear in their fear and their confusion. He thought it best not to tell them first about how he would be with them through the long years of their pilgrimage, not with them physically but through the Holy Spirit. He didn't think the first thing they needed to hear was that there was a great work for them to do while they were in this world and that he would help them do it. He didn't think they needed to hear in the first place of the obstacles that they would face and how he intended for them to surmount those obstacles. All of these things are still to come in the Upper Room Discourse. But at the first sign of their fear and confusion, he felt what they needed to hear was this: when all was said and done, there was home awaiting them, the Father's house, and a place for them in that house.

Many of you have read Sheldon Vanauken's magnificent book, *A Severe Mercy*. You may remember how it begins. The story all lies behind him, his love for Davy, their marriage, their halcyon days in Oxford, their coming to Christ under the influence of C. S. Lewis, their coming home to the United States as Christians, her sickness and sudden death. Now, six months after Davy's death, alone with his memories, he is stealing at night on to the family estate where he lived as a boy and a young man, where he lived when he first fell in love with the woman he had now lost. The estate no longer belonged to his family. It had been sold. So he was stealing back just to have the memories of those earlier days come over him again.

"He went on in the moonlight. At length he came to a sturdy wooden bridge. Here, long ago, he had said goodbye to his brother and Davy – Davy laughing with sunbeams filtering through the trees upon her brown hair – when he left to join the fleet. ... The real

farewell, not even dreamt of then, had been farewell to Glenmerle; for in the war years that were approaching, his youthful vigorous father had died and the estate had had to go. Now, more than a decade later, he stood again upon the old bridge; and Davy, unbelievably – especially here – was dead too. And Glenmerle, unchanged as far as he could see, save for the dry lily pond, lay serene and lovely under the moon.

Across the bridge the driveway swept up another, gentler hill to the house. He could see it plainly now in the flood of moonlight, long and white and spacious. Once, in the years that were gone, there would have been lights whatever the hour, if only a dim glow from his mother's room; but tonight all was dark. He could of course have come in the daytime and been welcomed by the present owner, but he would not see others in this place. Indeed, he would go no farther than the bridge. He looked up the hill at the big comfortable country house with the dark woods behind and the lawns sweeping away in front, first down from the house and then up to South Hill, where he had so often lain as a boy, tracing the stars with his father's...telescope.

He pictured the interior of the house as he had known it: the drawing-room with his mother half-reclining on the graceful old Duncan Phyfe sofa, the carved Chippendale chair that a great-aunt had brought from England, the oriental rugs glowing on the floor, the white columns of the mantelpiece. Past the fireplace, at the other end of the long room where the door opened into the study, was the piano: he could see his mother seated there with her auburn hair piled high on her head and hear her clear soprano singing the light-opera songs she loved. Or he might glance out a window and see her in the flower-garden cutting flowers or conferring with the ancient gardener.

Leaning there against the bridge railing in the deep still night, made only the more still by the faint murmurs and gurglings of the water beneath the bridge and the silent flashes of the fireflies, he thought of his childhood and youth in this place that was part of him, this place that lay about him so serene and lovely in the moonlight. It had been, beyond doubt, a place of accepted security. And a house of peace, peaceful and gay at the same time. His mother had gone through her days, cheerful and loving.... His father, when he was home from the great world, was quiet and relaxed and amused – though capable of fearful sternness. His mother had always been quick to praise and admire; his father's rare 'Well done!' had been a thing to treasure for days. A house of peace – now in the hushed night he could feel the immemorial peace that lay upon Glenmerle.

Glenmerle, he thought, had been a place to come home to, home from Kentucky or Florida or England, home from schools and home from college. He pictured coming home from boarding school, perhaps for the Christmas holidays, perhaps with snow all about – the woods full of snow. It would be a winter dusk with the big blue spruce a-twinkle with tiny white lights like stars, the big car sweeping up the hill to the house. Then his mother's cries of welcome and her kiss, his father's handshake, and his brother grinning in the background. And of course, as always, the cheery fire in the drawing-room, and through the french doors the dining-room alight with preparations. Upstairs, waiting, would be his own room, just as he had left it. Heaven itself, he thought, would be, *must* be – a coming home." [pp. 12-19]

Oh, yes, heaven is a coming home. Our Savior said it was. And then, that we might have no doubt at all, he added, "If it were not so, I would have told you." And he told his disciples, and in telling them told us also – all who trust in God and in his Son Jesus Christ –, that nothing would take the trouble from our hearts as surely as simply remembering that we were on our way to the Father's house and that the Lord Christ himself had guaranteed to take us safely there.