



# The Gospel of John

## Week 8: Goodbye/Hello

Brian Mattson - 07/20/2025

One of the cruelest realities in life is that it ends. Death is the final act of our earthly journey, a quality we share with all living things—humans, animals, plants, fashion trends. They all die, eventually. Sometimes I wish the 90s fashion trends would stay dead.

It seems to me that the human variety of living things experience the immense grief and sadness associated with death far greater than other animals. That doesn't mean animals don't experience grief. They do. If you don't agree, go read *Where the Red Fern Grows* or *Charlotte's Web* and remember you have a heart.

I have been fortunate enough to experience relatively little grief and death so far. I've lost all my grandparents at different stages in my life, from a young child to an adult. All hard in different ways. I've lost dear friends shockingly that shook me. But I've never lost someone or something that's been with me nearly everyday. I cannot imagine what it would be like to lose a parent or a child.

The closest I've come is when we lost our beloved dog, Albus, a little over a year ago. We had him for over 14 years. He was our kid before we had kids. Oh, it was hard. Debilitating? Uncomfortable? Suffocating? It was those things and more. For months, I still found myself forgetting he was gone, tiptoeing

through the house in the darkness for fear of tripping over him. Then I would remember. And the grief comes in waves, popping up still, more than a year later. But the good memories return with the same frequency. All the times we shared and the joy he brought to our home are bright spots in my days when they show up.

We have photos of him around the house. There's the portrait of him I had painted for Jessica's 30th birthday. We still have the card with his paw print and nose print from the day he died. Bittersweet reminders that the joy of living comes with the pain of death and separation. The accurate, but cliché, statement that those we love aren't really gone, just in our hearts and minds is an honest attempt to dull the brunt of sadness. But there's a lot of truth in that statement, and maybe a little challenge for ourselves if we are willing to see our sadness as a temporary setback, and the joy as the everlasting engine that drives us forward into good and noble living.

The pain of losing Albus never ends. It will stay with me. The joy of his time with us, though, is the thing that guides me. That comforts me. That brings a smile to my face. When he came into our lives, we knew the day would come when he would be gone. We couldn't really prepare for that then, but time doesn't stop, and neither can we. Death will come for all of us, all living things. But when we die, we are never completely gone.

It is much the same with Jesus and his disciples. He's been talking a lot recently that his time with them is nearing its end. They are scared, worried, and anxious. After the meal in the Upper Room and the foot washing scene, Judas leaves the group and Jesus begins preparing their hearts for his goodbye. He comforts them by explaining that the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, is coming soon and will continue to act as their guide. That was the focus of last week.

Then he gives them the last of the seven "I am" statement metaphors.

**"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing...My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."**

**- John 15:1-5,8**

What Jesus does here is twofold. He is referencing his earlier teaching and common metaphor of bearing fruit or new crops.

**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.**

**- John 12:24**

And secondly, he is giving them the secret to bearing fruit: stay close to Jesus. Abide in Jesus. Dwell in the relationship with God. Remain grounded through the Spirit. This is how the love of God is glorified and magnified. This is a beautiful picture of the future Christian community. A group of people shaped by love and intertwined with the abiding presence of God and Jesus.

Jesus spends multiple chapters in this Farewell Discourse section encouraging his followers to stay close because the journey forward will not always be easy. There will be threats, violence, excommunication, and death. But if they remember his teaching, his love, and his commandments, they will not stumble. And then he says a final prayer over the disciples. He begins by confirming that even though what lies ahead is scary and dangerous, sad and tear-filled, this was the plan all along.

**After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.**

**- John 17:1-5**

The disciples then make their way across the Kidron valley to a garden. This begins the familiar story of Jesus's arrest, interrogation, and death. We hear about Peter denying Jesus three times. We hear the questions from Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate. We hear the crowds yell, "Crucify him! Crucify him" And finally, the sentence has been rendered: Jesus will die by crucifixion.

Jesus is placed on the cross and lifted up between two others being crucified. This harkens the audience back to Jesus's words following the Nicodemus interaction in John 3: so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. And there at the cross, as a bookend to Jesus's story, is his mother, Mary. She is with Mary Magdalene, another Mary character, and the disciple Jesus loved. Jesus, fully God and fully man, becomes thirsty, takes his last drink, and breathes out the words, "It is finished." And with that, his earthly ministry was completed, so it seemed.

Following his death, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus's body for burial using an overabundance of spices and aloes, a nod to the exuberance of Mary Magdalene anointing Jesus's feet with perfume earlier in the gospel. They placed him in a tomb in the garden.

We know what happens next. Resurrection. The event we celebrate on Easter, Jesus rising from the tomb. The 31 verses of John 20 provide the

natural conclusion to this gospel. Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb, she tells Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and all three return to the garden. They find no body, so the disciples return home, but Mary stays, again the gospel writer is lifting up Mary as a model for all of us.

Jesus reveals himself to her and gives her the instruction to tell the others, instituting her nickname as the “apostle to the apostles.” Then, Jesus appears to the disciples and breathes his spirit on them, a far different account of the spirit coming than the Pentecost story in the book of Acts. And finally Jesus appears to Thomas a week later. And in these resurrection appearances in the Gospel of John, Jesus is telling Thomas, the other disciples, and us today, **“Do not doubt, but believe.”** *I was gone, but I’m really here*, is perhaps another way to think about that phrase. And in that vein, the chapter ends with this concluding statement: **Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.**

#### **- John 20:30-31**

Scholars contend that chapter 21 was probably added afterwards and should be read as an epilogue. In it, we read of Jesus appearing to the disciples on a fishing trip on the Sea of Galilee. It’s here, after a breakfast of fish, that Jesus asks three times if Peter loves him. This gives Peter the opportunity to express his deep love for Jesus, to be forgiven for denying Jesus three times, and be empowered to go out and lead the church into the future.

And finally, at the end of the gospel for real this time, we read about the Beloved Disciple. A character who is never named or identified, but whose stories and words are the basis of the Gospel of John. I want to spend a second here to dive into the juxtaposition of these two characters, Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

Peter is explicitly shown to be rash and reckless. He cut off someone's ear when Jesus was being arrested in the garden. He claimed he would never betray Christ, then immediately denied knowing him three times. And back when Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, Peter said, "You will never wash my feet," missing the point of the act. Peter is like all of us. Obstinate, ill-tempered, reckless, and rushed.

On the other hand, this Beloved Disciple character who shows up at the Last Supper near the end of the gospel models what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We don't really know who the Beloved Disciple is. Theories out there claim it is John the Evangelist. Perhaps it's Mary Magdalene or maybe Lazarus. Could it be someone else altogether? Jennifer Garcia Bashaw says this character represents the ideal disciple who leans on Jesus, follows him into danger, and remains faithful to the end. Episcopal Priest, Martin Smith, says this:

**Perhaps the disciple is never named, never individualized, so that we can more easily accept that he bears witness to an intimacy that is meant for each one of us. The closeness that he enjoyed is a sign of the closeness that is mine and yours because we are in Christ and Christ is in us.**

Both characters are embraced in the Kingdom of God, though. Regardless of our past, our faults and failures, God's grace covers us. And when we abide, dwell, live with Christ, he lives with us, ushering in Eternal Life. And that is what the Gospel of John is encouraging us to seek and find. Try it on for yourselves. Because even though Christ died, Christ lives. In us. Through us. With us. Death is scary. Death is sad. Death is inevitable. But death is not leaving.

Albus died, but my sweet little Golden Retriever is with me for the rest of my days. There's a poet who passed away this week whose words have touched people around the world. Their name was Andrea Gibson and Heather

passed on one of the poems. It was written in 2023 during a battle with ovarian cancer. A video of Andrea reading the poem to their partner has gone viral across social media recently. These words, though they are not Christ's, are a reminder to all of us of the power of love, death, and the endless echoes of those we have lost.

**My love, I was so wrong. Dying is the opposite of leaving. When I left my body, I did not go away. That portal of light was not a portal to elsewhere, but a portal to here. I am more here than I ever was before. I am more with you than I ever could have imagined. So close you look past me when wondering where I am. It's Ok. I know that to be human is to be farsighted. But feel me now, walking the chambers of your heart. Why did no one tell us that to die is to be reincarnated in those we love while they are still alive?**

The story of Jesus, his life *and* his death, is not just one we read and remember. It's a story we read, remember, re-tell, and relive. It was all part of the plan. Actively imitating Christ while he was alive, embodying the reality that when we die to ourselves and live an Eternal Life, we bear fruit. And that fruit lives on and multiplies, even when we cease to walk this earth. There's a goodbye, and then, in time, we can hear the hello.

Here are a few more words from Andrea's poem. They are not the words of Jesus, but they are the words of someone who was unafraid to confront death. Someone who understood that death does not stop love, it just changes its shape. Words I can see Jesus getting behind and saying, yes, this is how it is between me and you.

**My love, I want to sing it through the rafters of your bones,  
Dying is the opposite of leaving.  
I want to echo it through the corridor of your temples,**

**I am more with you than I ever was before.  
Do you understand?**

The writer of the Gospel of John is trying their best to answer that question. Do you understand who Jesus was? Who Jesus is? We've been invited on this journey into knowing and seeing Jesus as the Messiah. This gospel, more than the synoptics, is written as a beautiful story meant to be experienced. It uses metaphors to paint a picture. It tugs on our heartstrings. It causes us to ponder the words Jesus uses and to consider more than what we can simply see or read. And part of this story involves suffering and death. We can't just skip over that because we know that resurrection happens on the other side. The disciples didn't know that. So when suffering comes they should not panic. We should not panic. Stay the course. Don't flip out in every direction and try to fix it yourself like Peter (and then run away when you can't). Lean in like the beloved disciple. Believe that Jesus is in it too. That somehow that will make a difference. When Jesus seems most absent, it may just be when he is most present. Suffering is something to neither avoid nor seek out. It just is part of living as a human. But in the midst of it is God. With us through it all.