

## John 16:16-22

### Introduction

This morning, we come to the closing section of this discourse of Jesus—or these “last words” of Jesus—before He goes to the cross. The discourse began after Judas Iscariot had gone out to betray Jesus (13:30-31), and we could say that the first part “ended” when Jesus and the disciples left the upper room to go to the Garden of Gethsemane (14:31). Jesus spoke at the beginning about the fact that He was going away, but that His going away was the key to His coming and being present with His disciples — physically after the resurrection, and then in and through the Holy Spirit, and then when He would come again to receive the disciples to Himself. (Each “presence” is the guarantee and down payment on the next and so there is really only one “presence”).

In the middle section of the discourse (15:1-16:15), Jesus speaks to His disciples about the true vine and fruit-bearing, and about the hatred of the world, and about the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the world and on behalf of the disciples. The middle section emphasizes the disciples’ life in the world after Jesus has come to them again.

Now, as we come to the closing section of this discourse, Jesus returns again to the theme of His going away so that He might come again to His disciples and be with them forever. So we begin in chapter sixteen, verse sixteen:

**I. John 16:16 (cf. 14:18-19, 28)** — “A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me.”

Why does Jesus talk like this? We know from Matthew’s Gospel that He had told His disciples clearly that He would be crucified and that on the third day He would be raised up (Mat. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). So why doesn’t Jesus say here, “A little while, and I will be crucified; and again a little while, and I will be raised up”? Maybe, on the eve of His crucifixion, such plain talk would do more harm than good – since the disciples still don’t understand. But I think there’s another reason.

“A little while, and you will no longer *see [theoreo]* Me; and again a little while, and you will *see [horao]* Me.” “Seeing” has been a major theme in John (*theoreo, horao/eidos, blepo*). On the one hand, seeing can be very literal – like you’re seeing me and I’m seeing you (cf. Jn. 6:19; 20:29). But seeing, in John, is often a spiritual seeing — a discerning and perceiving of spiritual realities.

- John 6:40 (cf. 4:19; 12:45; 14:17) — “This is the will of My Father, that everyone who sees [*theoreo*] the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.”
- John 14:7 (cf. 1:51; 3:3; 12:40) — “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen [*horao*] Him.”

Sometimes the literal, physical seeing represents a deeper spiritual perception.

- John 1:46 (cf. 1:38-39) — Nathanael said to [Philip], “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see [*eidon*].”
- John 11:40 — Jesus said to [Martha], “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see [*horao*] the glory of God?”
- John 17:24 — “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see [*theoreo*] My glory which You have given Me.”

Sometimes, the literal physical seeing is an ironic reference to spiritual blindness.

- John 2:23 (cf. 6:2, 26, 30) — Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, seeing [*theoreo*] His signs which He was doing.

But they didn’t really *see*, did they (cf. 2:24)?

We read in John chapter nine:

- John 9:35–39 — Jesus heard that they had put [the man who was formerly blind] out, and finding him, He said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus said to him, “You have both seen [*horao*] Him, and He is the one who is talking with you.” And he said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Him. And Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see [*blepo*; et al] may see, and that those who see may become blind.”

Physical sight is an amazing gift. But spiritual sight is a far more amazing gift. To see not only with our physical eyes, but with the eyes of our heart.

When Jesus says, “A little while, and you will no longer see Me,” He means that the disciples will no longer see Him physically because He will be dead and buried in a tomb. But this inability to see Jesus physically will represent a far deeper darkness that will descend on the disciples. When Jesus lies in the tomb and the disciples no longer see Him, then the veil of Jesus’ fleshly weakness will be so complete as to seem to the disciples that Jesus has been utterly defeated. All that they thought they had once seen would seem like an illusion, and for “a little while” they would be completely blinded to who Jesus was. “A little while, and you will no longer *see* [*bleoreo*] Me.”

It’s against this backdrop that we understand what Jesus says next: “and again a little while, and you will *see* [*horao*] Me.” Jesus means that the disciples will see Jesus physically when He comes to them after His resurrection. But this seeing of Jesus physically will represent a deeper spiritual sight that will be given to the disciples. When the disciples see the resurrected Jesus, then the veil of His fleshly weakness will be completely taken away and they will *see* that He has triumphed even over death itself.

There are two layers of meaning in these words (the physical and the spiritual), but two layers that are wholly bound up together: “A little while, and you will no longer *see* [*bleoreo*] Me; and again a little while, and you will *see* [*horao*] Me.”

**II. John 16:17–18** — Some of His disciples then said to one another, “What is this He is telling us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” So they were saying, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is talking about.”

The disciples are lost. Notice how they add in a previous quote from Jesus: “Because I go to the Father.” Just moments ago, Jesus said to them:

➤ John 16:8, 10 — [The Advocate] will convict the world... concerning [its] righteousness, *because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me.*

There, the “no longer seeing” is a positive thing. It’s the result of Jesus going to the Father. The disciples will no longer see or know Jesus according to the flesh because He will be glorified at God’s right hand. Here, the “no longer seeing” is a negative and sorrowful thing. It’s the result not of Jesus going to the Father, but of Jesus dead and buried in a tomb. Then the disciples will no longer *see* Jesus as the Messiah because to all appearances He will have been defeated by death. The disciples are mixing these two sayings of Jesus—the positive and the negative; the “no longer seeing” because Jesus is glorified at the Father’s right hand and the “no longer seeing” because Jesus is dead and buried in a tomb—without any true understanding of either one. So what they hear Jesus saying is this: “A little while, and you will no longer see Me [*because I’m going to the Father*]; and again a little while, and you will see Me [*because I’ll come right back from the Father*].” But why should Jesus go to the Father only to come right back? “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is talking about.” How wonderful it is that we, today, can know what Jesus is talking about!

**III. John 16:19–20** — Jesus knew that they were wishing to question Him, and He said to them, “Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me’? Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will cry and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful [grieved/distressed], but your sorrow will be turned into joy.”

A little while, and you will no longer see Me — and so you will cry and lament. We understand now (even if the disciples still can’t) that Jesus is saying: You will cry and lament because you will believe that the one you thought was the Messiah has been conquered by death. Everything that you thought you had seen will seem like an illusion. For “a little while” you’ll be totally blinded to who I am. The Greek words for “cry” and “lament” are strong words; and they’re even stronger together. The disciples will weep loudly, mourning in great distress. They will cry and lament because they will think that Jesus is defeated and that God’s salvation has not come into the world. “But *the world* will rejoice.” *The world* (in particular, the unbelieving Jews) will rejoice for the same reason that the disciples cry and lament – because it will believe that Jesus has been silenced by death. There had never been, and there never would be again, a *kind* of crying and lamenting like the disciples were about to experience. There had never been, and there never would be again, this kind of hopeless pit of despair. They would no longer *see* Jesus. The light of the world would be taken away from them and they would feel themselves in the darkness of a night that would never, ever end.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will cry and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful [grieved/distressed], *but your sorrow will be turned into joy.*” “A little while, and you will no longer see Me; *and again a little while, and you will see Me.*” What is this joy? It’s the joy of seeing Jesus. But not just of seeing Jesus as the disciples had seen Him before. We understand now (even if the disciples still can’t) that Jesus is saying: You will see Me no longer as one who is susceptible to suffering and death, but as the one who has triumphed over death forever. You will see Me—and perceive Me—in My true saving power and glory.

Could Jesus have spared the disciples this crying and lamenting?—This mental anguish and suffering? Yes, but only temporarily, if He had refused the cross. For those first disciples, the only way to the ultimate joy was through the deepest sorrow. The only way to the highest mountain plateau of joy was through the deepest valley of anguish. There was no other way. Jesus continues in verses 21-22:

**IV. John 16:21** — “Whenever a woman is in labor she has sorrow [mental distress; *lype*], because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the suffering [*thlipsis*] because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.”

Especially in the days before anesthetics, the *only way* for a woman to know the joy of holding her own newborn baby was to know first the sorrow and the anguish of childbirth. In fact, it’s actually *through* the birth pains of labor that a child is born into the world. Each painful contraction brings the baby nearer to delivery. The more intense and painful the contractions become, the nearer is the moment of delivery. And in the end, the most painful moment is the moment of delivery, when the child first enters into the world. And so in this way, it’s the pain *itself* that brings forth joy.

In the Old Testament, the imagery of a woman in the pain and anguish of hard labor was often used to describe the condition of men and of nations when they were suffering the judgments of God (Ps. 48:4-7; Isa. 13:6-8; 21:3; Jer. 48:41; 49:22, 24; 50:43).

- Jeremiah 4:31 (cf. 13:21-22; 22:23) — I heard a cry as of a woman in labor, The **anguish** [*sa-rah*] as of one giving birth to her first child, The cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, Stretching out her hands, saying, “Ah, woe is me, for I faint before murderers.”
- Jeremiah 6:24 — Our hands are limp. **Anguish** [*sa-rah/thlipsis*] has seized us, pain as of a woman in childbirth.

But just as the anguish of a woman in labor is followed by the joy of a child born into the world, so also the sufferings of God’s people were to be followed by salvation.

- Jeremiah 30:4-9 (Mic. 4:9-10) — Thus says the Lord, “I have heard a sound of terror, of dread, and there is no peace. Ask now, and see if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And why have all faces turned pale? Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s **distress** [*sa-rah*], but he will be saved from it. It shall come about on that day,” declares the Lord of hosts, “that I will break his yoke from off their neck and will tear off their bonds; and

strangers will no longer make them their slaves. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.”

But how can this be? How can the joy of salvation follow the sorrow and the anguish of judgment? How can Israel, through its own suffering of labor pains ever bring forth children into the world (Isa. 37:3; Hos. 13:12-13)? We read in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 26:16–18 — O Lord, they sought You in **distress/anguish** [*sar/thlipsis*]; they could only whisper a prayer, Your chastening was upon them. As the pregnant woman approaches the time to give birth, she writhes and cries out in her labor pains, thus were we before You, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed in labor, we gave birth, as it seems, only to wind. We could not accomplish deliverance for the earth, nor were inhabitants of the world born.

But then Isaiah continues:

- Isaiah 26:19 — Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.

Israel, through its own suffering of the judgments of God could not accomplish salvation or give birth to a redeemed people. But what Israel could not do through its own sufferings, God would do miraculously. We see this here in the imagery of an entire people resurrected from the dead (that’s us in the church; Gal. 4:26-28). In Isaiah 66, Israel (Zion) successfully gives birth to a land and a nation, but without ever experiencing the pains of labor.

- Isaiah 66:7–9 — “Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she gave birth to a boy. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation [the New Covenant church; Gal. 4:26-28] be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons. Shall I bring to the point of birth and not give delivery?” says the Lord. “Or shall I who gives delivery shut the womb?” says your God.

On the one hand, the suffering of Israel (pictured as the pains of a woman in labor) will be *followed* by salvation. On the other hand, it will not be *through* Israel’s suffering that this salvation comes. It will not be through Israel’s labor pains that a redeemed people is born into the world. How can the Israel that writhes and cries out in her labor pains give birth only to wind while the Israel that experiences no labor pains at all gives birth in one day to an entire redeemed people? The answer is that the Messiah would take upon Himself all the labor pains of Israel so that through His suffering and anguish, a redeemed people would be born into the world—all the offspring of Zion—in a single day.

Throughout John, the word “hour” has always referred to the hour when God’s salvation is revealed (Jn. 4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 16:2, 4, 25, 32). Even more specifically, it’s referred to the hour of those anguished “labor pains” of Jesus in His suffering and death (Jn. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). So Jesus says: “Whenever a woman is in labor she has sorrow, because her *hour*

has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the suffering because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.”

It’s the pain and the suffering and the anguish itself that brings forth joy — for the mother, it’s the joy of seeing her child. But isn’t this about the sorrow and the joy of the disciples? Are we mixing their sorrow and joy with the sorrow and joy of Jesus? Jesus continues in verse 22:

**V. John 16:22** — “Therefore you also have sorrow now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.”

Until now, Jesus has always emphasized *the disciples* not seeing or seeing *Him*. “A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me.” But now, instead of saying, “*You* will see *Me* again, and your heart will rejoice,” Jesus says, “But *I* will see *you* again, and *your* heart will rejoice, and no one will take *your* joy away from you.” The unquenchable joy of the disciples will be rooted not ultimately in them seeing Jesus, but in Jesus seeing them. Like the sorrow and anguish of a woman in labor gives birth to her joy in seeing her child, so the sorrow and the anguish of Jesus in suffering the righteous judgments of God will give birth to His joy in seeing His children – in seeing the disciples as His own redeemed offspring. And then the disciples, too, will *see*. Listen again to the prophet Isaiah:

➤ Isaiah 53:10–11 (cf. Lk. 12:50; Jn. 12:37; Mat. 26:38) — But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to **grief**; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, **He will see His offspring**, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. **As a result** of the **anguish** of His soul, He will see and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.

The joy of the disciples will be their reciprocation of the joy of Jesus – Jesus *seeing* them, and they, in turn, *seeing* Jesus. And no one would ever take this joy away from them – not even when the cloud had taken Jesus physically from their sight (Acts 1:9). That’s why we, too can have the unquenchable joy of those first disciples. We haven’t yet seen Jesus literally and physically, but we have seen Him through their eyewitness testimony as the one who has triumphed over death forever. And our joy in seeing Him is just the “reflex” of His joy in seeing us. After describing how Zion would give birth to a nation in one day, without ever experiencing the pains of labor, Isaiah says:

➤ Isaiah 66:10, 14 — Be *joyful* with Jerusalem and *rejoice* [*chairō*] for her, all you who love her; be *exceedingly glad* with her, all you who *mourn* over her... **Then you will see this**, and your heart will be *glad* [*chairō*]...

We are the offspring that Jesus has brought into the world in and through the labor pains that He suffered — when He endured the grief and anguish of all God’s righteous judgments. And so we do not weep and lament. We are not sorrowful, but joyful. And no one — and no thing — can ever take our joy away from us.

## Conclusion

If, through the labor pains of the Messiah, children have been born into the world, we know that God's salvation is here. And yet we also know that we still have pain and suffering in this world. In just a few verses, Jesus will say:

- John 16:33 — “In the world you have tribulation [suffering/anguish; *thlipsis*], but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Our suffering is a sharing in the finished sufferings of Christ (cf. Phil. 3:10). And that means that our suffering is never fruitless. It's just the pains of labor before we, too, experience the birth of resurrection (cf. Hos. 13:12-13). The Apostle Paul says:

- Acts 14:22 — *Through* many tribulations [*thlipsis*] we must enter the kingdom of God.
- 2 Corinthians 4:17 — For momentary, light affliction [*thlipsis*] is *producing* for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

And then listen to Paul's words in Romans chapter eight:

- Romans 8:18–23 — For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

Even in our groaning, we rejoice with a joy that can never be taken away from us (cf. Rom. 8:16-17; 1 Pet. 1:8; 4:13). Paul says it like this:

- 2 Corinthians 6:10 — ...as sorrowful [*lypeo*] yet always rejoicing...

We are the offspring that Jesus has already brought into the world through the sorrow and anguish of the labor pains that He bore in our place. And now all of our sufferings are simply the pains of labor before we, too, are born into His resurrection life.

- Isaiah 35:10 — And the ransomed of the Lord will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.