

“A Little While”
John 16:16-33
Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹⁶ “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷ So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father?’” ¹⁸ So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’? ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

²⁵ “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

²⁹ His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹ Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

– John 16:16-33, ESV

Sorrow Before Joy

One of the most memorable things I have learned from Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias is this truth: "All pleasure must be bought at the price of pain." The way you can tell a legitimate pleasure from an illegitimate pleasure is this: With legitimate pleasure, the pain comes before the pleasure, You pay for it in advance. With an illegitimate pleasure, the pain comes afterward.

This insight has stuck in my mind over the years, along with two other bits of truth:

1. Sin will always take you farther than you wanted to go, keep you longer than you wanted to stay and cost you more than you were willing to pay.

2. Life is short, but eternity is forever.

Whenever we are enduring hardship, pain or sorrow, these truths are vital for us to remember.

The disciples were enduring sorrow at the thought of their Lord and Master leaving them. They would endure the agony of seeing Him crucified, but this pain would be followed by the joy of seeing Him alive again.

However, after seeing Him alive again, they would again have to endure the hardship of watching Him go away, this time in His ascension to heaven. But that sorrow would be followed by the joy of receiving the Holy Spirit who would empower their witness for the glory of God and the advance of the cause of Christ in the world.

However, their witness would be met with hostility from the world, which would lead them through more difficulty and pain, and ultimately for most of them, to bloody deaths at the hands of their persecutors. But no sooner would they draw their last breath in this world but they would find themselves in the presence of God forever, free from sin and blessed with the enjoyment of the presence of God – remembering the words of Psalm 16 – *“in Your presence is fullness of joy, at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”*

I. “A Little While”

Jesus begins this final section of His teaching to His disciples on this final night He has with them with words that puzzle them, language about “a little while” –

¹⁶“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father?’” ¹⁸So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’? ²⁰Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.

A. Immediate Application for Disciples

For the disciples themselves, these words would have an immediate fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In just a little while, He would be taken from them and would die, and they would be filled with sorrow. Then, after a little while (3 days), He would rise again from the dead with eternal life in a glorified body and appear to them, filling them with joy. And the world, because it is opposed to Christ and His kingdom, would experience the opposite emotions of the disciples – when the disciples grieved at the death of Christ, the world rejoiced at the death of the One they hated and Who troubled them so much. But then, after just a little while, the disciples would rejoice and the world would be thrown into chaos and confusion as Jesus rose from the dead.

Notice that both the sorrow of the disciples and the rejoicing of the world last for only “a little while.”

B. Ongoing Application for the Church

While these words of Jesus have their direct and immediate fulfillment in the experience of the disciples, they have ongoing application in the life of the church, in the experience of all Christians throughout the ages. In this life, we who follow Jesus are often called to suffer. We also sense His absence and, even though we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we long to see Jesus face-to-face.

Last week, we noted Jesus' teaching that having His indwelling, abiding, spiritual presence through the ministry of the Holy Spirit is better than merely having His physical presence without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Yet, don't all of us who love the Lord Jesus long for both? Don't we yearn for both the indwelling, abiding presence of the Holy Spirit and the face-to-face presence of Jesus?

And so, we must remember the words "a little while" as well. As I've been meditating on this passage this past week, an old Amy Grant song has been going through my mind:

*Days like these are just a test of our will
Will we walk or will we fall?
Well, I can almost see the top of the hill
And I believe it's worth it all*

*In a little while
We'll be with the father
Can't you see him smile? (oh)
In a little while,
We'll be home forever
In a while
We're just here to learn to love him
We'll be home in just a little while*

Keeping this "little while" perspective clear in our hearts and minds helps us live for the right things. Both in terms of what we're called to endure and in terms of what we choose to pursue, we need to remember that this life is indeed just a little while compared to the true life to come.

II. "Sorrow Will Turn into Joy"

It's not just that the time of sorrow for the disciples would be short, but Jesus says their sorrow would be turned to joy.

You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

A. A Human Being Has Been Born into the World

When Jesus tells the disciples “your sorrow will turn into joy,” He immediately turns to the image of a woman in childbirth. This is not only because this is a powerful and effective image, but also because Jesus is drawing on what God had told His people through the prophet Isaiah –

1. First of all, the imagery of childbirth is itself a powerful and effective one: When a woman is in the travails of labor, the pain can be intense, so intense as to cause the woman laboring to sometimes lose perspective and to just wish it could all be over. But when the child is born, a sense of satisfaction and peace often washes over the mom, in what is sometimes called “post-natal euphoria” as the pain is forgotten and the joy of new life overwhelms everything else. I know this is not always the case for all women, so if it wasn’t your experience, you shouldn’t feel guilty. But nevertheless it is a common experience as mother and baby bond in the first moments of life.
2. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, Jesus is drawing on the language of the prophet Isaiah who compared the trials and travails of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians to childbirth, only theirs was a childbirth that did not produce joy. In Isaiah 26:17-18, we read:

*Like a pregnant woman
who writhes and cries out in her pangs
when she is near to giving birth,
so were we because of you, O LORD;
¹⁸ we were pregnant, we writhed,
but we have given birth to wind.
We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth,
and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen.*

But then God answers this complaint of His people in verse 19 –

*¹⁹ Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.
You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth will give birth to the dead.*

Notice the final satisfaction Israel seeks will come at last in the form of resurrection from the dead. Thus, successful childbirth is being compared to resurrection.

Jesus’ words have a powerful double-meaning when He says: “*she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.*” The joy of childbirth is paralleled to the joy of God’s people that, at last, a human being has been brought into the world of the resurrection, to the new creation.

This joy turns their sorrow into joy as they realize that the death of Jesus, which caused them such distress and pain, was in fact the birthing pain of new creation. What caused them grief now, on the other side of resurrection, causes them joy, and the cross becomes a sign of hope and love and forgiveness, the way of our salvation, whereas before it was a sign of despair and desperation.

So it will be with our lives and their painful struggles once we emerge on the other side of resurrection. It's not just that our time of sorrow will be short and the joy which follows will be everlasting. That in itself a wonderful promise and a powerful truth! Yet the truth is more deeply wonderful still. C.S Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, puts it this way –

“That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, “No future bliss can make up for it” not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”

Or, in the words of Scripture, 2 Corinthians 4:17: “*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,*”

Your sorrow will turn into joy!

B. No One Will Take Your Joy from You

Not only will your sorrow turn into joy, but no one will take your joy from you. Again, as happens so often for me, the words of Romans 8 come to mind -

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Every sorrow of a believer is temporary, and every enemy of a believer has been defeated and will be defeated, but every true joy of a believer is permanent. For whatever joys the Lord gives us in this life are His good gifts, given in Fatherly love for us, and His gifts will never be taken away, but the joys of this life are but the first course, the appetizers of the feast of joy to come.

III. “In That Day . . . The Hour is Coming”

Jesus then tells His disciples what they will enjoy after His resurrection:

²⁵ “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶ In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

A. Plain Knowledge of God

One thing has characterized the disciples on this final night of Jesus’ teaching: Confusion. Part of the confusion has been due to Jesus’ own language. He has spoken in figures of speech and in hints and allusions. He has done this throughout His earthly ministry, spoken in figures of speech, in parables, in veiled language and in sometimes obscure images.

Jesus tells them after the resurrection when the Holy Spirit comes, their understanding of Him and His kingdom will be much clearer. Compare the language Jesus uses in the Gospels to the language of Peter and John in their letters, 1 & 2 Peter and 1, 2 & 3 John. The veil of obscurity has been lifted and the language is clear and direct. This is the gift of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We enjoy a much fuller and more robust understanding of Jesus and His work of salvation because of the complete New Testament than the disciples had when they were face-to-face with Jesus before His death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. We understand things they never grasped because we live on this side of the cross and the Spirit’s coming.

And yet, still, our knowledge of God and of Christ is not complete. We are still awaiting that day, on the other side of our own resurrection, when we enter into glory and enjoy life with Jesus in the New Heavens and the New Earth. On that day, faith will become sight and words will become flesh in a way we cannot understand on this side of the Resurrection.

B. Direct Access to God

Just as the disciples’ knowledge of God would become clearer after Jesus dies, rises and sends the Spirit, so will their access to God. They will be able to directly approach the throne of God and ask in Jesus’ name for the things they need for God’s glory in this world.

As believers, we have the wonderful privilege of direct access to God as our Heavenly Father. We don’t need any mediators other than Christ, in whose name we pray and through Whom we have our access. We talk to God directly and, through the Spirit, we call Him, “Abba, Father.” We get to ask the Father for our needs in Jesus’ name, according to His character and for His kingdom and glory.

And yet even in prayer, we often sense the distance and our hearts long for the gap to be closed. So even in prayer we are reminded of that day when we will no longer pray but gather around the throne of God in unveiled worship.

In the “already, but not yet” – “You will have tribulation. But take heart.”

In all of these things – in our suffering and our joy, in our knowing and our longing, in our prayer and our worship – we live in the reality of salvation accomplished and yet still coming, of Christ victorious and yet still returning, of the kingdom come but the kingdom yet to be consummated. We are pregnant with a real and living and victorious hope, but we are still in the travail of childbirth.

To us, living in this time, Jesus gives a final promise, a final word of encouragement – *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

Jesus tells us this so we would not trust and boast in ourselves but only in Him. The disciples thought they knew and understood, so Jesus had to tell them how wrong they were, how weak they were, how unreliable they would soon prove to be, but then He told them how strong He is, how reliable He is.

Jesus says this to us: Don't think you know. Don't think you understand. Don't think you will stand. Look to me – *“In me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*