

John 16:4b-7

Introduction

In chapter fifteen, Jesus has introduced the two themes of, on the one hand, bearing much fruit (in the world), and, on the other hand, being hated and persecuted by the world. We've seen, on the one hand, we must not be guilty of a misguided pessimism and defeatism that causes us to forget our appointment to go and bear much fruit in the world, fruit that abides forever. And we've seen, on the other hand, that we must not be guilty of a misguided optimism or triumphalism that leaves us surprised and overwhelmed when we find that we're hated and persecuted by the world. Fruit-bearing and persecution, love and hatred, must always be held in tension together so we don't "grow weary and lose heart" (Heb. 12:3). But as we're about to see, the disciples are not yet able to understand all of this. We pick up again in chapter sixteen and the second half of verse four, where Jesus says to His disciples:

I. John 16:4b — "These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you."

Until now, Jesus has not spoken to His disciples about suffering and persecution because as long as He was with them there wasn't any real danger or threat of suffering and persecution. As long as Jesus was with the disciples, the hatred of the world was directed against Him and so the disciples were overlooked as irrelevant. The assumption was this: "Get rid of the leader and then the people who follow Him will be scattered and come to nothing" (cf. Acts 5:36-37). While Jesus was with them, the disciples were "safe."

But now Jesus is about to leave the disciples and the hatred that's so far been directed exclusively at Jesus is about to expand and take in also all those who profess to be Jesus' disciples. In other words, what happens when the leader is thought to have been got rid of, but then the people who follow Him are *not* scattered and do *not* come to nothing? Then the hatred of the world for Jesus that's culminating even now in the cross will continue on in the hatred of the world for those who follow Jesus as their risen and ascended Lord. Do we see what this must mean? When Jesus speaks of the world's coming hatred for His disciples, He's assuming and even promising—in so many words—His own continued presence with His disciples as the risen Lord. The very fact of our discipleship and of the world's hatred of us on this account is the evidence that Jesus is not dead, but alive forevermore. Christianity is not a religion built on the teachings of a dead man, but one built on personal discipleship to a living Lord.

Until now the disciples have been "safe" because Jesus was with them in the flesh. That's why until now Jesus has not spoken to the disciples about being hated and persecuted. Could Jesus have said something to them earlier? He could have, but what would that have accomplished? Jesus hasn't hidden from His disciples the realities of His own rejection by the world. He's given them no reason to expect a "bed of roses" or a life of ease for themselves. But at the same time, if Jesus had said all these things to the disciples earlier, they wouldn't have been any more "prepared" or any better off. In fact, Jesus says these things now only so that when their hour comes, the disciples might remember that He told them of them in advance (16:4a). If Jesus had said these things to the disciple earlier, what would the result have been? They would have been either uncomprehending, or ready to take up arms, or overwhelmed with confusion and fear.

Jesus knows this. “These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.” Calvin writes: “As the apostles were still weak and tender, so long as Christ conversed with them in the flesh, their singularly good and indulgent Master spared them, and did not suffer them to be urged beyond what they were able to bear.” See, again, the tender care of Jesus for His disciples, whom He knows intimately; and so also His tender care for us. See, again, the perfect patience of Jesus with His disciples, and so also His perfect patience with us, whom He knows intimately. “These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.”

II. John 16:5a — “But now I am going to Him who sent Me;

On the one hand, this is a simple explanation of why Jesus is saying these things *now* – because soon He will no longer be with His disciples. But it’s important to notice that that’s not actually what Jesus says. He doesn’t say, “But now I am no longer going to be with you,” but rather, “now I am going to Him who sent Me.” He doesn’t emphasize who He’s leaving, but where and to whom He’s going. And so this isn’t meant only as an explanation of why Jesus is saying these things *now*; Jesus intends this, preeminently, as an awesome encouragement and comfort.

What does it mean when Jesus goes to the one who sent Him? We remember what Jesus said earlier in this Gospel:

➤ John 4:34 — “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”

So when Jesus goes to the One who sent Him, this must mean that He has fully accomplished the work that He was sent to do. Jesus said in chapter six:

➤ John 6:38–39 — “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.”

So when Jesus goes to the One who sent Him, this must mean that we are now eternally secure in Jesus’ hands, and that our future salvation is fully assured and guaranteed. Jesus has stated these same things explicitly right here in this discourse:

➤ John 14:1–3 — “*Do not let your heart be troubled*; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for **I go to prepare a place for you**. And if **I go** and prepare a place for you, *I will come again* and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

➤ John 14:12— “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and *greater works than these he will do because I go to the Father.*”

➤ John 14:27–28 — “*Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you*; not as the world gives do I give to you. *Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful*. You heard that I said to you, ‘**I go away**, and I will come to you.’ *If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.*”

Why does Jesus say to His disciples: “But now *I am going to Him who sent Me?*” Not only to explain why it is that He’s saying these things to them now (about the world’s hatred and

persecution), but also so that in the very midst of these “warnings” they might be supremely comforted and encouraged and strengthened and even filled with joy. But the disciples hear in Jesus’ words, instead of a cause for joy, only a cause for sorrow.

III. John 16:5–6 — “But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.”

How are we to explain the fact that the very words Jesus intends as a cause for joy are received by His disciples as a cause for the opposite of joy?—As a cause for sorrow? In order to answer that question, we need to ask another question: How can Jesus say, “none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going,’” when just a little earlier in the evening, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, where are You going?” (13:33-36) Thomas asked, “Lord, we do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?” (14:5)

Some people see this as an irreconcilable contradiction and therefore proof that there are different literary sources for John that don’t always agree. But in this case, we have to assume that the author of John (or the editor) must be randomly throwing together different source materials without any concern at all for unity or agreement. Any honest reading of John will prove that this isn’t the case. The author of John has carefully crafted and composed this Gospel to be a single, organic whole. This, then, leaves the critics with only one option. They must conclude that the author (or editor) of John accidentally missed this contradiction. But this is incredible, and also unfair. The fact of the matter is that the author of John knew about this *formal* contradiction, but did nothing to “fix” it precisely because he didn’t see it as a *real* contradiction. Therefore, the preservation of this formal contradiction (and of other seeming contradictions) is actually just further proof of the integrity and accuracy of the biblical record.

Jesus didn’t emphasize who He’s leaving, but where and to whom He’s going. The disciples, on the other hand, are not nearly so concerned with where or to whom Jesus is going as they are with the simple fact that He’s leaving them. We know this because Jesus has repeatedly told the disciples exactly where He is going (cf. 14:2-4, 12, 27-28). Even right here in these verses, Jesus begins by telling His disciples yet again: “But now I am going to Him who sent Me.” When, therefore, Jesus continues in the very same breath, “and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are you going,’” His point is this, “but none of you are really concerned or really care where it is that I am going or why I am going there. Your minds are still too consumed with the temporal interests of man — with temporal earthly priorities.” There is reproof here in Jesus’ words. Reproof for the disciples, and reproof, too, for us.

If the disciples were really focused on understanding where Jesus was going and what this would mean for them, and for the kingdom, and for the whole future history of the world, then how could their hearts be so filled with sorrow?—How could their hearts be so taken over with sorrow? It’s one thing to be sorrowful because something sorrowful has happened. Even if the disciples had perfect insight into the meaning of the coming sufferings and death of Jesus, their sorrow because of this suffering and death would still be understandable (cf. Jn. 16:20-22). But it’s another thing to be sorrowful precisely because of something that’s good news and that should actually cause us rejoicing.

The disciples can only see in Jesus' words a sorrowful—and even a foreboding—“farewell.” When Jesus says, “But now I am going to Him who sent Me,” they hear only, “But now I am going away from you.” They're not yet able to see that even as this farewell will bring with it separation, so it will also be the key to Christ's spiritual presence with them (by the Holy Spirit poured out) and also the key to their being finally gathered together to be with Jesus forever. They're not yet able to see that even as this farewell will bring with it suffering and persecution, so it will also be the key to their true and lasting joy in the triumph of Christ's kingdom. God's ways are not our ways. The temporal interests of man are not the interests of God. We read in Matthew's Gospel:

- Matthew 16:21–23 — From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on the things of God [the eternal, resurrection glory of Jesus], but on the things of man [the temporal, earthly glory of Jesus].”

But when we can come to embrace the ways and the interests of God, and to see all of life through His eyes, as it were, then the sorrow that fills our hearts will always be replaced with fullness of joy as the dominating condition of our heart (cf. 15:11; 16:24).

- John 14:28 — “If you loved Me, you would have *rejoiced* because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.”
- John 15:11 — “These things I have spoken to you so that My *joy* may be in you, and that your *joy* may be full.”
- John 16:23–24 — “On that day you will not question Me about anything. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your *joy* may be made full.”

Jesus has said things to us to sober us, to caution us, to reprove us; but He has never said *anything* to us in order to fill our hearts with sorrow. Instead, all that Jesus has ever said to us is intended solely for our happiness and joy. So why, then, are the disciples' hearts filled with sorrow because of what Jesus has said to them? Because even in the midst of their devotion to Jesus—and seemingly as an expression of their devotion to Jesus—they're still setting their minds not on the things of God, but on the things of man. So now Jesus continues in verse seven:

IV. John 16:7 — “But I tell you the truth [despite whatever else the disciples may think], it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.”

Jesus' isn't saying that the Holy Spirit will be a “better” or a more successful Advocate than He has been, but only that the disciples will not be left without an Advocate, and that, in fact, the coming of this “other” Advocate will be the result of His own arrival in heaven and of His own enthronement at God's right hand. Already, Jesus has said in chapters fourteen and fifteen:

- John 14:16–17 — “And *I will ask the Father, and He will give you* another Advocate, that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him. You know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.”
- John 14:25–26 — “These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, *whom the Father will send in My name*, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”
- John 15:26–27 — “When the Advocate comes, *whom I will send to you from the Father*, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning.”

And now Jesus says: “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away [to Him who sent Me]; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but *if I go, I will send Him to you.*” In the first passage, Jesus said: “I will *ask* the Father, and *He* will give you another Advocate.” In the second passage, Jesus spoke of “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom *the Father will send in My name.*” In the third passage, Jesus speaks of when the Advocate will come, and says, “whom *I will send to you from the Father.*” And now in our text this morning, Jesus says simply: “If I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but *if I go, I will send Him to you.*” In short: The coming of this “other” Advocate will be the result of Jesus own ascension into heaven and of His own enthronement at the right hand of the Father.

It will be through the Spirit’s presence with and in His disciples that Jesus will shepherd His people and rule over them as their King. It will be through the Spirit’s presence with and in His disciples that Jesus will empower them to go and bear much fruit in the midst of a world that will hate and persecute them even to the death. It will be through the Spirit’s presence with and in His disciples that Jesus’ kingdom will spread to all the nations of the earth. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the sign that Messiah’s kingdom is here—that Jesus has been enthroned in power and majesty at God’s right hand, that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him (Mat. 28:18). Therefore, we should be able to see—even if on the night of Jesus’ betrayal the disciples couldn’t—the awesome truth in Jesus’ words: “it is to your *advantage* that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but *if I go, I will send Him to you.*”

Here, I want to quote briefly again from Calvin: “We must not put the question, ‘Could not Christ have drawn down the Holy Spirit while he [remained] on earth [after His resurrection]?’ For Christ takes for granted all that had been decreed by the Father.” And so must we. We don’t need to ask about “what ifs” and possibilities when God has revealed to us His will and plan. To ask such questions, as Calvin says, would be “foolish and pernicious.” Instead, we can rest our minds wholly in what God has decreed in His infinite wisdom, for His own eternal glory, and for our eternal salvation.

Do we see, then, that it is to our advantage that Jesus has gone away? And are we able, now, to wait with patience and with fullness of joy for the day when He returns and takes us to Himself – to be with Him where He is?

Conclusion

Are our hearts filled with sorrow, or do we have true fullness of joy? Are our hearts cold and complacent toward the present reign of Christ through His Spirit, or are they full of love and zeal for His kingdom? Have we set our minds on the things of man, or have we set our minds on the things of God? To what extent could we say that our Christianity is essentially a following of Jesus only “according to [His] flesh” (as though Jesus were not truly living and reigning today; cf. 2 Cor. 5:16)—a weak and anemic Christianity, assuming it’s a true Christianity—and to what extent could we say our Christianity is a following after Jesus according to the power of His resurrection life? Do we see and know the difference? Paul writes in Colossians:

- Colossians 3:1–4 — Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

It was when the disciples finally grasped this great truth that even after being flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, they could go on their way “rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:40-42). Let us, then, set our minds on the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God – knowing that when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then we also will be revealed with Him in glory. May our hearts never be filled with sorrow, but even in the midst of sorrow, may they have always a true fullness of joy.