

## **“Joy after Sorrow”**

**John 16:17-33**

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### **Text Comment**

- v.17 The question of interpretation posed by these verses is whether in saying “and then in a little while you will see me” the Lord is speaking of his appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, a matter of just a few days after that Thursday night in the Upper Room, or his coming in the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, some 50 days later, or his second coming at the end of history, or is he deliberately ambiguous and intends for his readers to think of all of these events at once? I am going to argue that the plainest sense of the Lord’s words is that he is referring to his appearances to them, just a few days later, immediately after his resurrection. But, it is true that *those appearances* – which proved that he was alive again and still at work in the world, bringing to pass the program he had told them about, those purposes which would be furthered by Pentecost and eventually culminate in his second coming – I say, those appearances right after his resurrection prefigured and anticipated the later ones. [Barrett; Morris, 702]
- v.18 Remember, it was for these men a completely alien thought that the Messiah, once he had appeared in the world, would suffer and die. As a result, all of this that makes so much sense to us and made so much sense to them later, made no sense whatsoever at the time. As the French commentator, Godet, puts their confusion: “If Jesus wishes to found the Messianic kingdom, why go away? If He does not wish it, why return?” [In Morris, 704]
- v.19 When John repeats the same words in v. 19 as he has already quoted Jesus saying them in v. 16 and the disciples repeating them in v. 17, we are put on alert that the thought of these words is key, is central to his point.
- v.20 In John 20:20 we read that when the disciples saw the risen Lord they were “overjoyed.”
- v.22 At several points in the OT prophets, the image of a woman in the throes of birth pangs is used to describe the sorrow and pain God’s people must suffer until the Messiah appears and then their relief and joy at his arrival. In Isa. 26:16-21, for example, you have this image, the words “a little while”, and a reference to the resurrection of the dead. Jesus is not simply making up an illustration. He is drawing on the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and the age of salvation in the OT prophets. He is speaking of the birth pangs that would precede and lead to the birth of the Messiah’s kingdom.
- v.23 Very clearly, when this day takes place that Jesus is referring to, a new situation will have emerged. The “you will no longer ask me anything” perhaps is best taken as a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit who will, as we have already heard, teach them all things and guide them into all truth. That Christians will pray directly to the Father has already been mentioned in 15:16. Here, in John’s characteristic way, the thought is repeated with slight variations.

- v.24 Up to this point, of course, they hadn't known to ask the Father in the Son's name. They hadn't understood the triune character of God.
- v.26 Remember, asking in Jesus' name is not a way of saying that we ask him for his help or provision; it is a way of saying that we will pray on the basis of all he has done for us and pray for that we know is pleasing to him, pray for the strength to do what he would do were he with us in the world as he was in the day of the ministry; it is praying *on his behalf*.
- v.27 The Son does not have to persuade the Father to be gracious to them! They can count on the Father's love just as well as his.
- v.28 The Lord is repeating himself and putting his point in somewhat different terms. They will find themselves in coming days more and more clearly in the circle of God's own love: they will find themselves embraced by the love that exists between the Father and the Son.
- v.30 That is: " 'you don't have to wait for questions to be put into words.' You understand what is in people's minds." There is no ignorance so complete as that which is completely unaware of itself! These men did *not* understand, as the morrow would demonstrate.
- v.32 "You believe at last!" is probably to be taken as irony. The Lord knows full well how little they really have grasped what he has said. "Time" in v. 32, as before in v. 25, is *hora*, "hour," that so important term in John, the time of the fulfillment of Christ's work in the world: the time of his being lifted up on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation. And at the dawning of that "hour" these men are not going to be found fully awake, aware of what is happening, rejoicing in faith at the fulfillment of all their expectations. They will be scattered in fear, in dismay, disconsolate to see all their hopes and dreams so cruelly shattered as the Lord Jesus is taken to the cross. They have faith, they really do; but its quality is weak; it will not yet stand up to the hour of supreme testing
- v.33 The Lord ends the thought not with their failure, their collapse, but with his triumph.

Now this is a difficult passage, like others in the Gospel of John. John strings together thought after thought and the connection is not always clear to us. "What exactly is the Lord after in what he says?" we ask, after reading these verses. If you read the commentaries on John, you would find that they too struggle to get the Lord's exact sense and, sometimes, disagree quite substantially as to what he means in one statement or another. We cannot always have simpler thoughts before us as we work our way through the Bible. As in Paul, so in John there are things difficult to understand. My task is not to make everything simple, but to set the Word of God before you as clearly as I can. But there is something here in this paragraph that, though difficult, is clear enough and, I think, is of terrible importance, something that a Christian must face and must come to understand or there will always be great problems relating his or her faith to the

world in which he or she actually lives. It is here that doubts can rise in a Christian soul and here that great strength and hope may also be found.

I am speaking about the new situation that Jesus is describing here, the situation that will be brought to pass by his resurrection, by his appearances to them after his terrible death had so demoralized and crushed them. “In that day...” he says, certain things will come to pass. Clearly he is describing a new dawning of the Messianic kingdom following its birth pangs, those birth pangs the worst part of which they are about to pass through – the Lord’s arrest, trial, execution, and the shattering of all their hopes.

Then will come the great joy as he says in vv. 21-22, a joy that no one can take from you. But, there is more. When that day dawns – and, remember, we are in fact talking about a day that will have dawned in just three days – When Jesus spoke these words it was Thursday evening. On the next Sunday morning the day Jesus is here speaking about will have come – I say, when that day dawns, they will ask whatever they want from the Father and he will give it to them.

Now how can Jesus say that? How can he promise them that they will have whatever they ask from the Father in heaven? How can he speak of an endless and boundless joy? That isn’t what happened, is it? In the years that followed the Lord’s resurrection, the prayers of his disciples were like our prayers. Some were answered and some were not. Sometimes their hearts were brim full of delight at all that God had done for them and was doing through them, but there were times, we know there were from the express teaching of the Bible, there were times when their hearts were heavy and they suffered keen disappointment. Sometimes that disappointment was in themselves, sometimes it was in others, and sometimes, to be honest, it was with God because he hadn’t done in and for them what they had hoped he would. Is that not *our* situation?

Indeed, has that not *always* been the situation of God’s people, from the very beginning, from Eden to the present? Do you receive everything you ask from the Father? Do you even receive all the things you ask for that you have good reason to believe you have asked for according to God’s will and with right motives? You oldest and most experienced Christians, have you not prayed for many things and earnestly and continually prayed for them, but still they have not yet been given to you and, in some cases, were not given to you so long that now it is too late; you will never have them: the salvation of someone now in the grave; the recovery of someone who died of his disease; the repentance of a child who has grown up hard of heart; a man or a woman to marry; the ability to conceive a child; some lasting victory over one of your besetting sins; or lesser things -- the job that went to someone else; the love of a woman who married another; the house of your dreams that was taken off the market or sold to someone else; and on and on it goes. I know I have prayed for you as your pastor, prayed for many things that I thought the Lord would surely give you, and he has not. And, believe me, I know something of your sorrows. I know that life has not been unbroken joy for many of you, nothing like unbroken joy. So, how can the Lord speak as he does here? How can he speak of the kingdom of imperishable joy having come at his resurrection and of always answered prayer?

The fact is, this problem, the tension between the statements of the Word of God and the experience of our lives in the world is encountered everywhere in the Bible, not just here. It is

characteristic for the Bible to speak as the Lord does here, in these unqualified ways about the triumph and the happiness and the unalloyed prosperity that will be ours in the kingdom of God.

It was this way in the OT. Remember, we have said that so many of these “before and after” statements in the Gospels have to be interpreted in terms of objective accomplishment rather than subjective experience. Paul says, for example, in Romans 5, that while we were his enemies God reconciled us to himself by Christ’s death on the cross, although he has already made a point of saying in the previous chapter that the saints of the OT also partook of the righteousness of Jesus Christ and so reconciliation with God just as we do today. They received justification and reconciliation *on the basis of and in anticipation of the work Christ would do* rather than on the basis of the work he has done, as it is in our case. The gifts of God and Christ go backward as well as forward in history and in the teaching of the Bible. That is clear. And so it is not surprising that the saints of the former epoch, living in the same spiritual world that we live in, felt the same tension between the kingdom of God in its promise and in its fulfillment. And that tension is described in the same way, with all the possibilities for confusion that we meet with in the Lord’s teaching and that of the NT. Deuteronomy, for example, describes the kingdom that God is going to set up for his people in the Promised Land and the life they are going to live there as a life of unqualified prosperity. But it wasn’t that way, even for the faithful and the pious and the truly believing among God’s people. This was a problem for them and they struggled, just as we do, with knowing how to think about what seemed to be a disjunction, a dissonance, between what God had promised and what they themselves experienced. There are many texts in the OT that discuss that very problem. How come God said that he would bless us in all these ways, but our lives have not turned out that way; we don’t have those blessings; and, what is more, sometimes the wicked seem to have them when the righteous do not! You remember how many times that problem is raised as a problem of faith. Psalm 73 is one example, Job another, Ecclesiastes another.

What are we to make of this? How are we to understand the Lord’s promise here about this new day of joy and triumph? How are we to understand it now, after some 2,000 years, when the church and individual Christians can hardly be said to be surging forward from one magnificent triumph to another? When it can hardly be said that all true Christians have all their prayers answered and live in unmixed joy.

Well, many things might be said in answer to this question, but there is something very important to be said from this text itself. And if this is understood and taken to heart, you will be a Christian of deeper understanding, of a more sophisticated grasp of both Holy Scripture and of the way of faith in the world. You will know how you ought to think and get strength and inspiration rather than doubt and confusion from your observation of the world and your own life.

What I mean is that we are being taught here **we must always reckon with the eschatological character of the Bible’s teaching of the kingdom of God, by which I mean the Bible’s history of salvation perspective. “Eschatological” is a big word and used in biblical theology in very technical ways. But it refers to something very simple: the step-by-step outworking of the divine plan for history. The Bible sees everything in terms of the outworking of the divine plan of salvation in a way that we often do not. Jesus did, the**

**prophets did, the apostles did. We are much more inclined to judge things by the way in which we ourselves experience them day by day and year by year. They thought in ultimates, in ends, in the culmination of things.**

I told you earlier that the Lord took the image of birth pangs issuing in the joy of the Messiah's kingdom from the prophets of the OT. Those prophets were always presenting the future in a foreshortened form. In their prophecies of the Messiah's coming – and there are many of them like this – they speak of his coming and of the consummation of all his purposes in the world in a single breath, as if there weren't to be this long period of time separating the Lord's first coming from his second. Over and again Isaiah says that the servant of the Lord will appear and bring justice to the world: the lion will lie down with the lamb and of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. Over and again this vision of the future triumph of the Messiah is set before us in the prophets. He will come and the world will blossom white; the wicked will be no more and the righteous will rejoice forever. *No wonder the disciples couldn't understand the Lord when he spoke of coming and going and his followers being scattered.* When the Messiah arrives, so the prophets seem to say, that will be that! Things will be put right, wonderfully right.

And the Lord seems to say many things in his own teaching *just like that*. He seems to say that the end and the consummation of all things is upon them, or, at least, just around the corner. He speaks to his own disciples over and over again *as if they are going to be in the world when he returns in triumph!* Never once does the Savior say in talking about what is to come, "Now, you people will not see any of this; you will be long in heaven when these things come to pass; but some distant generation of my people will see it." He *never* says that. He tells his disciples such things as this: "...when *you* see all these things, you know that [the coming of the Son of Man] is near." [Matt. 24:33] Is this not the reason why generation after generation of the followers of Christ were sure that he was going to come back during *their* lifetime? And how many generations of Christians have been wrong about *that*?

Well, here in our text, the Lord is speaking in that same way. He seems to be saying – using both answered prayer and indestructible joy as illustrations – that in a little while the kingdom of God will have come and that will be that! You will be riding on the heights of the land! It is that same way of speaking with which any careful reader of the Bible is now very familiar.

However difficult and complicated this may make the Bible's teaching for us, it is unmistakably the way the Bible speaks. It is always looking at the future, at the end of all things, at the fulfillment of all things *as if it were upon us*. No, even that doesn't quite get it right. It speaks as if *the future were already here!* We are taught everywhere in the Bible to think of our lives and our situation in the world in terms of the soon and certain coming of the Lord Jesus and the consummation of all things. And a proof of this is that the Bible uses a phrase like "in a little while", which Jesus uses here, or an adverb like "soon" to refer to both events that are but a few days away – the Lord's cross and resurrection as here – and his second coming which, in the event, was at least 2000 years distant!

We are never taught that the fulfillment of Christ's kingdom is far in the future and so we should live in the knowledge of that fact; that we should settle in for a long wait. No! We must live in

the knowledge of its coming, its certain coming, its soon coming. It may be that “soon” is more a theological reality than a chronological one to us – we do not typically speak of something as coming “soon” that is not coming for another 2,000 years and more – but that is the way the Bible always speaks. In Heb. 10:37 we read, “For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay...’” But that is about the Lord’s coming again, his *second* coming, and the “very little while” has lasted now 2,000 years! “In a very little while...” It is this perspective that lies behind the NT practice of referring to the epoch begun at Pentecost as “the last days.” Last days, yes, because the great events upon which the consummation and end of human history rest – the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ – now lie behind us. But, “last days” clearly suggests, is meant to suggest, a period soon to come to an end. But 2000 years now lie in that “soon.” “The God of peace,” Paul wrote, “will *soon* crush Satan under your feet.” [Rom. 16:20] The effect of the cross and the Lord’s victory on the cross will soon be revealed in its entirety. Do you see how this goes? “Behold I am coming quickly,” Jesus said. The very last direct quote we have from him in the Bible. Rev. 22:20: “Behold I am coming quickly.” The NIV has, “Yes, I am coming soon.” That is the way he always spoke and that is the way he speaks to us now. No wonder many interpreters have taken the Lord in these verses in John 16, when he spoke of his disciples seeing him again “in a little while,” to be referring to his *second coming*! We must appreciate the force and the point and the purpose of this way of speaking, if we would have a biblical mind. We must not be confused by it, but stirred and strengthened by it.

Do you see how the Bible sees everything in a whole: what Christ did *and* its eventual and final consequence. It is all seen as one. And we are being taught to see it as one as well. We are being taught in this way to live in the absolutely certain and living confidence that all that Christ has won for us and all that he has promised us is so certain of fulfillment, so definitely ours, that it is as if we will have it in our hands tomorrow! Here is the point: our lives are rightly understood not first in the circumstances of our days and months and years, but in the great happenings of the history of salvation, the cross, the resurrection, and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to this from the Scottish preacher Robert Candlish. It is a passage from a sermon entitled *Christ Coming Quickly*. This is very wise and very important. It is the perspective the Bible is after in us and the Lord Christ is after in us. And what a difference that perspective must make if we always live in it and with it.

“To a believer, the mere possibility, or even absolute certainty, of ages being yet to elapse before the Lord come again, ought no more to diminish the influence of that event upon his mind, and heart, and conscience, than the fact of ages having elapsed since the Lord came at first lessens the moral weight of his constant vivid sight of Christ and him crucified.... I know no chronology and no chronological computation of long eras, in dealing with the Saviour, who eighteen hundred years ago trod with his blessed feet the soil of Judea, and expired on the cross of Calvary. Then why should there be any real difficulty in applying this principle in the prospect, more than in the retrospect? Does faith mounting up in the ascending series of years to the opening up of the fountain, long centuries ago, lose all sense of distance and remoteness in the bright and vivid apprehension of the cross? And will not the same faith in its keen glance downwards and

onwards along the stream of time, seize the one great and only object of its hope, and bring it near, even to the very door, ay, though ages may seem to come in between? ..These are the two events, the death of shame, the coming in glory, which faith, when rightly exercised, grasps; which I, believing, grasp. I grasp them as equally real, equally nigh. Christ dying, near and present, Christ coming, near and present. What though ages have run since that death and ages more are perhaps to run before that coming! It is nothing to me. ... Wherever I am, whatever I am about, ought I not to be alive to my position between these two manifestations of Christ, and these alone? Behind me Christ dying; before me Christ coming. Is it not thus, and only thus, that I live by the faith of him who loved me and gave himself for me; that I live also by the power of the world to come; enduring as seeing him who is invisible?" [Cited in I. Murray, *Puritan Hope*, 215-216.]

There is no mistake here on the Lord's part. No dishonesty. He isn't playing fast and loose with the truth in speaking about endless and boundless joy and prayers that are always heard and answered. Let there be no thought of that! Look at the last verse of our text. "In this world you will have trouble..." He spoke in another place of going on a long journey and of his servants growing weary waiting for his return. Oh, no. The Bible tells it like it is. It is very honest, painfully honest about the struggles, the troubles and disappointments of even the finest Christian life. But, see how he ends. "But I have overcome the world!"

He has! And we are included in that triumph. It is ours. For all intents and purposes *it is already ours*. And that we never forget that and live in the certainty of it, the Bible speaks so often as it does, as if the consummation had already come or, at least, was upon us. Your life is not rightly understood, if you are a Christian, you do not see yourself and your situation correctly, unless you see yourself standing right between the cross and the second coming, as someone who is about to be raised up to the world of endless joy because Jesus Christ was raised up on the cross for you. Every day and in every circumstance, there you are, the cross behind you and the great day ahead beckoning. The two absolute certainties of every Christian's existence. Christ's overcoming the world for you means to you that the world of boundless joy and the satisfaction of desire is upon you, so certainly upon you, he can speak of it and you can think of it as if you were already there!