

Sorrow into Joy

John 16:16-24

I generally use three or four different commentaries to help me understand and interpret whatever text I am preaching on, ones I have well selected for faithfulness and consistency. Usually, they don't disagree, but provide me with complimentary and mutually consistent explanations. That didn't happen with our text today.

When I started reading and thinking about our text today, the first immediate question in my own mind was "when." When would his disciples see Jesus again?

v.16

What was Jesus referring to? It seemed to me he could be referring either to the resurrection or to the second coming. One of my commentaries clearly spoke of the second coming. But another, just as clearly said that the reference was to the resurrection. And to make matters worse, a third commentary gave me a third different interpretation, explaining that Jesus was talking about his presence with his disciples through the Holy Spirit throughout the NT age. So now I have three choices. Which was correct?

I guess I shouldn't feel too badly in my uncertainty, though, because the disciples were confused also.

v.17-19

But Jesus didn't answer their question. And as I thought about it more fully, those three explanations weren't contradictory; they are actually all true.

I. JESUS SHALL RETURN.

The disciples would see Jesus on the third day, raised from

the dead. They would see him, in spirit and in truth, in the person of the Holy Spirit throughout the age. And they would see him when he returned at the final judgment at the end of the age. So, without definitely declaring to you which event Jesus might have actually been referring to in verse 16, we will look at all three. They are all true, which is to say, each of these statements or propositions is true. First,

A. Jesus shall return from the dead in his bodily resurrection.

That would certainly be the most immediate fulfillment of what Jesus had spoken.

v.16

The straightforward idea would be this, "In a few hours I shall be removed by death and burial, and then you will not see me; and again after three days I shall rise again, and then you will see me."

Now, that is true. It is one of the fundamental doctrines of our faith. There is an absolute necessity that every one of you believe that. Jesus would die and be buried. He would remain under the power of death for three days, and then his body would be raised from the tomb. His physical body would be brought back to life, in triumph and power of death itself.

The importance of that is that Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits which guarantees our resurrection and eternal life!

1 Cor. 15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming."

That's all review for you, and I know it. But what an edifying review, to be reminded of the simple, basic truths of the Christian faith. But let's move on to the second possibility of when the disciples would see Jesus again.

B. Jesus shall return to dwell with his people through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Remember the encouragement at the end of the great commission in,

Mat. 28:20 "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Indeed, we know,

Mat. 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

It is true that Jesus is with us now, and that is a glorious encouragement. He was put to death while on earth. He was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, and yet he remains with us in the Spirit.

There is a good reference supporting this interpretation, in, John 14:16 "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever-- 17 "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. 19 "A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also."

Back in verse 16 of our text, Jesus says, "You will see me because I go to the Father." And the context here is that the very reason that he went to his father was so that he could pour out the Holy Spirit upon the church, as we studied last week.

John 16:7 "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

Let me again give you the great encouragement of the sure and certain understanding that the Holy Spirit is, now, and throughout this age, given by Jesus to his church. He doesn't come and go. And it really is a very practical issue. How do you answer someone who says that the Holy Spirit does come and go, and therefore might very well leave you alone?

The answer is, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." "I will not leave you orphans."

The answer is, again, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever."

So he is with you today, giving you all the comfort and help that is possible in the grace of God. He is giving you all the guidance and instruction that you need, enabling you to understand and apply the infallible truth of Scripture. He is with you today, having washed you of your sin and now stirring you and moving you to walk faithfully with God.

He is among us as a church, bringing unbelievers to salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. He is among us working in the hearts of his people to serve in the church. The Holy Spirit is with us. He will be with us to the end of the age. He shall establish us and will build his church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against us.

Jesus has returned, in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. But make no mistake about it. In a very distinctive and unique sense,

C. Jesus shall return at the end of the age to establish his eternal kingdom.

Again, v.16

If I HAD to pick one of these three interpretations of what Jesus is referring to in that verse, I would pick this one. His second coming. We shall see Jesus again, in the flesh, at the last day. And that will be “in a little while.”

Hebrews 10:37 “For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.”

That is the proper perspective upon this age, this period of time that began with Christ’s first coming and will come to an end with his second coming. Back in 1 Corinthians 15, after Paul speaks about the second coming of Jesus, he write,

1 Cor. 15:24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

That is the end, when the last enemy death will be destroyed! Christ shall return in glory and judgment, and all who have died in Christ will be raised to life with him.

1 Cor. 15:51 “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed-- 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Jesus shall return, and when he does,

II. HE SHALL TURN OUR SORROW INTO JOY.

v.20b “Your sorrow will be turned into joy.”

That’s the application of all this. That’s really what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples, and that’s why, I believe, he doesn’t answer their questions about when he will return. The point is that when he does, all the sorrows and tribulations of this age and this world will be put into their proper perspective.

But what about now?

A. Our sorrow is caused by the anguish of Jesus’ absence.

And without contradicting all that said about Jesus being present with his church throughout this age, still, the full display of his power and authority is not yet revealed. And so we sorrow. You sorrow. You feel it in your own lives. Life often becomes very difficult.

The only way to come to terms with that situation is to realize that although Jesus is present, yet the fullness of his kingdom has not yet been revealed. And so, in sorrow, we wait.

v.20a

In a general sense, that describes this whole age. It is an age of sorrow, and don’t let any simplistic, superficial brand of Christianity try to convince you otherwise. As we will study next week, Jesus says in,

v.33 “In the world you will have tribulation.”

And it is not just because of your own individual sins. Your sins could well cause you trouble, but you will have trouble anyway. There is trouble everywhere to be found, in this fallen world. We live in a fallen world.

So when things that seem bad enter our lives, when the struggles and temptations come to you, when “sorrow like sea

billows roll,” then recognize that you live in a fallen world. And although Jesus has died to accomplish salvation for all his people, still the full effect of that redemption has come about yet. The kingdom has been established, but it is not yet fully come. Christ reigns upon his throne at the right hand of God the father, but not every knee does not yet bow to him and every tongue does not yet confess that he is Lord.

Although he is the great physician, still there is sickness. And death. And pain. And suffering. And sorrow.

For the disciples, facing Jesus’ death, that sorrow was immediate. And painful. Jesus would be leaving the earth, in the flesh. He would no longer be with them.

But what’s the point of all this? Paul’s point is so obvious.

B. Our joy shall overshadow our sorrow.

That’s practical isn’t it? If you have any sorrows or suffering, it is very practical. Jesus shall turn our sorrow into joy. Eternal joy. Exceeding joy.

Here is the proper perspective on life,

Rom. 8:18 “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Similarly,

1 Peter 4:12 “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”

Jesus gives us a very simple and easy to understand illustration of this. A woman in labor.

v.21-22

Obviously, I have never given birth, and of course, I never will. I have seen many women exhilarated by the joy of a newborn child. And I’ve seen it up close and personal in my own family. I was able to be see and observe the pain and struggle of that sorrowful ordeal that we very appropriately call “labor.”

There is great pain in the process, but the outcome overshadows it. That’s the very graphic and down to earth illustration of our whole lives throughout this whole age! We groan, as Paul writes in Romans 8.

Rom. 8:22 “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. 23 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.”

Birth pangs. That is the proper perspective upon life! We groan in sorrow and anguish. We wait eagerly and expectantly for the second coming of Jesus and the resurrection of our bodies. And just as the woman who has given birth can attest, the joy of that final day will completely overshadow whatever sorrow we might have to endure now.

Let me encourage you with this description of that joy that shall be ours on that great day,

Rev. 21:2 “Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be

with them and be their God. 4 “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

But until that time, what are we to do? In a word, pray.

Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus ends this particularly section of teaching his disciples with an encouragement to pray.

v.23-24

What he is really saying is that,

III. JESUS SHALL RETURN AND END OUR NEED TO PRAY.

v.23 “In that day you will ask Me nothing.”

You won't need to. You will be with Christ. The curse of the fallen world will be removed. The very presence of sin will be eliminated. But,

A. Until Jesus returns, we should be confident to ask for all things in Jesus' name.

v.23b

Just a couple of thoughts, that you need to know when reading a verse like that. Those thoughts center on the meaning of the phrase, “In my Name.”

It is not just a mechanical formula, but rather the full realization that he is our mediator. Our Larger Catechism describes it so characteristically well, Q.180, “To pray in the name of Christ is, in obedience to his command, and in confidence on his promises, to ask mercy for his sake; not by bare mentioning of his name, but by drawing our encouragement to pray, and our

boldness, strength, and hope of acceptance in prayer, from Christ and his mediation.”

And to pray with a mediator is to submit to the will of that mediator. It is not to demand or oblige. It is not that our prayers cause God to have an obligation to give us what we ask for. Rather, it is his great promise, that he will give to us what we ask, in accordance with his own good and perfect will.

Even Jesus, in praying in his own name, said to the Father, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.”

But don't let that keep you from praying, because Jesus' here was to rebuke his disciples for their failure to pray!

v.24

I suspect many of us would deserve a similar rebuke! Jesus has said the same thing so often, and still they hesitate to ask.

Mat. 7:7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

Also, James 4:2 “Yet you do not have because you do not ask.”

I wonder how often that is true of us. We have not because we have asked not. We have not because we have not had the faithfulness, nor the diligence, nor the perseverance, nor the courage, nor the vision, nor the expectation, nor the FAITH, to ask.

So where there is trouble, ask. Ask God. Where there is a need, ask. Where there is uncertainty, ask God. And your asking is a indicator of your faith, because your asking corresponds to

what you really expect God to do, or more accurately, I believe what you believe him to be capable of doing. So ask. Whatever it is.

And when you do, you will notice something else. When you ask, you will be able to experience joy. Even if you have to wait for the answer, or even if the request is not granted in God's perfect plan. Still there is the joy of confident trust. And,

B. Until Jesus returns, our joy is a product of our prayer.
v.24

Joy is such a wonderful thing, and worthy of much further study. But for our subject this morning, let me emphasize how Calvin describes it, "Nothing will be lacking for the perfect abundance of all blessings, for the height of our desires and for calm contentment, provided that we ask from God whatever we need in His name."

In other words, it is the desire of our savior that our joy might be made full. And as he approached his own horrible death and crucifixion, it was his objective to encourage his disciples in their pursuit of the fullness of joy. He urged them to pray. And it was in their prayers that they would come to know joy.

It's not automatic. In fact, sometimes God doesn't actually give us what we ask for. There will be sorrow in this world. But if you want to know what real joy is, pray. Whatever your trial, whatever your sorrow, pray. Ask. In Jesus' name.

v.24 "Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."