

GRIEF INTO JOY A SERMON ON JOHN 16:17-33

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

As we've worked through Jesus' final discourse before his execution, we've seen him develop a theme of comfort. Remember that we started this extended conversation back in chapter 14 with Jesus saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." Over the past several sections, Jesus, in expanding on this theme of comfort has told his disciples that He and he alone is the way the truth and the life. He has promised that they would never be alone because the Holy Spirit was coming to be with them. He promised that with the Holy Spirit's help, we could live a fruitful life that pleases God. Lastly, we saw that the Holy Spirit sustains us, even when the rest of the world hates us.

Now, this week, we see that after all these words of reassurance and comfort, the disciples still don't get it. They still don't understand what Jesus is talking about. Yes, they understand that Jesus is about to go away, but they don't understand the timing or the matter of Jesus' return to them. Therefore, despite the words of comfort that Jesus has been giving them, they remain confused and uneasy about the future.

How are we much different? Who among us here has not been confused about why God allowed certain things to happen? Who has not asked the question, "Why did God place me here at this time?" Who hasn't faced an unwelcome surprise and wondered where God was in the mix? Everything seems to be going well — you're making some advances in your endeavors, and then suddenly something comes unexpectedly that derails everything you've been doing. Why God? I'm confused. Why are you allowing this to happen? What do you mean by this?

Jesus gives answer to his disciples' confusion, and in so doing, he helps us through some of our own confusion. Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say that he'll take the confusion away or make everything clear immediately. In verse 20, he says that his disciples will weep — they will grieve. Jesus doesn't promise immediate relief; he promises that things will get worse, in the short term. Look at our text:

Some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?"

They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."

Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father."

Then Jesus' disciples said, "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God."

"You believe at last!" Jesus answered. "But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

First note that Jesus promises the grief will turn to joy. Look at verses 20-22 (I tell you the truth...). The grief is not replaced by joy — it turns into joy. Consider the example of Joni Erickson-Tada. Joni became a quadriplegic after a diving accident. Joni didn't let her condition hinder her — she began to paint by holding the paintbrush in her teeth. She wrote several books. She is the head of *Joni and Friends*, an international ministry that helps take used wheelchairs and other medical supplies from the United States to needy children all around the

world. The grief that initially accompanied her condition has, by God's grace, turned to joy. And that joy has overflowed into thousands of people's lives.

The apostle Paul experienced grief turning to joy in a different way. Think of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 —

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Many have speculated about what the thorn in the flesh might be. That's not disinteresting, but don't miss the main point — that through that weakness, whatever it was, God prompted Paul to lean all the more upon Christ's grace.

If that was so for Joni Erickson-Tada and for Paul, it is true for us as well. Whatever your particular pain or wound or struggle, God wants to use it to increase your obedience to Him and to encourage more people to come to Him. He won't take away the pain and the struggle as much as he will transform it into a deeper reliance upon him, and thus a deeper joy.

Second note that the Father will give whatever we ask in Jesus name. Look at verses 23-24. We've seen this concept earlier in 14:13 when Jesus says "I will do whatever you ask in my name" and 15:16 when he says "...the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." Now again, a promise that we will receive whatever we ask in Jesus name. What does this mean?

First, we deal with the obvious — clearly Jesus does not mean that use of his name works like a magical talisman to get whatever we desire. If that were the case, why would he promise that we would grieve — we could simply use his name to get out of the situation that will cause us grief? No, Jesus isn't that simplistic. But then what did he mean by this statement?

In the Old Testament, the name of God was a source of power in itself. The second commandment in Exodus 20:7 forbids the misuse of the name of the Lord. The Psalms abound with praise for the name of the Lord and it is the name of the Lord that gives power to the prophets. The actual name of God was so sacred that it was not pronounced. Whenever the Jewish scribes read the name, which we transliterate into English as Yahweh or less accurately, Jehovah, they would state "Hashem" which simply means "The Name." They would also say

“Adonai,” which means “Lord”. If there was so much reverence and respect for God’s name, then we may safely assume that such respect should be carried over to Jesus as well. Therefore, praying in his name means to pray under His lordship, seeking his desires, not our own.

My thinking on this one has been heavily influence by scholar D. A. Carson, who teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago. In writing about this passage, he tells about his own prayer experience. He had begun praying once a week with a minister friend of his. They would get together and go through all the people that Carson thought they should pray for. After some time, this minister suggested that rather than going through the “list”, they instead pray for guidance on what to pray for around some particular focused issues. Thus, they should stop assuming they knew what to ask for, and they should seek Jesus guidance even on that.

One of the people they prayed for was a young nurse named Diane. Diane had become a Christian two years before while in nursing school. Now, she had been diagnosed with advanced leukemia, and she was corresponding with Dr. Carson. Her letters were filled with bitterness, anger, and confusion. Carson was at a loss — what should he pray for her? Miraculous healing? Inner peace? A painless death? Instead, he and his minister friend prayed for God’s wisdom and then they searched the Scriptures. They found in God’s Word many promises that God would keep his people no matter what. Because they were quite sure that this young lady was a Christian, they prayed that God would honor these specific Scriptural promises toward Diane, and they prayed this in Jesus name. That was on a Monday night. That Thursday, Carson received a letter from Diane that had been written Tuesday. She woke that morning feeling refreshed and renewed like she had never felt before. She was singing hymns and felt rested in the Lord. She indicated that if it were God’s will, she was ready to die and go be with Him. A few weeks later, she did die, having left an incredible impression on those around her in the hospital.

You see, asking in Jesus name means asking under his lordship. It means asking, “Thy will be done”. It means getting our own agendas out of the way and trying to find out what God’s agenda is. Thus, this promise isn’t so much a promise to fulfill our every whim as it is a promise to bring our desires more in line with God’s desires.

So Jesus shows that when we’re facing troubled times, he turns our grief into joy and he orients our desires to God’s desires. In conclusion, Jesus brings the whole discourse full circle in verses 32-33. He reminds his disciples once again that they will have trouble in the world, but to take heart because he has overcome the world. It’s a dual promise of pain and ultimate victory. It’s a promise that encompasses both the cross and the resurrection. Jesus here prepares his disciples and us for the inevitable fact that to get to Easter, we have

to go through good Friday — to have the victory, we must follow Jesus as he carries his cross. Victory comes, but only at the price of the broken body and spilt blood of the only innocent man who ever lived. Ultimately, this cross is our only hope for strength in troubled times. It reminds us that on the other side of all the pain and struggle, there is joy unimaginable. It reminds us that our grief is turned into joy and our imperfect desires are brought into line with his perfect will. Take that to heart. Amen.