

Christ Comforts His Disciples, and the Joy of the World

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John 16:16–23 · Church Postil (Lenker edition)

16 A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father. 17 Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? 18 They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith. 19 Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? 20 Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. 21 A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. 22 And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. 23 And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. John 16:16-23

[1] First, we will consider this narrative in the simplest manner, as it occurred after the Last Supper, while the Lord was in the garden on the way with his disciples to his last sufferings and death. In this historical narrative of today's Gospel the Lord preaches his death and resurrection to his disciples, the words of which narrative the disciples at the time failed to understand, these words being to them dark sayings and totally hidden from them — an experience that may easily be ours, those of us who are not yet firmly established in the faith. What, however, hindered the beloved disciples from understanding the narrative? This, namely, that they thought Christ was about to establish a temporal kingdom which would make an impression upon the world, and move along in pure, perpetual life, not in death, of which he here speaks when he says: "A little while, and ye behold me no more." As if he wished to say: I will be with you yet a little while longer, perhaps to midnight; after that I will

die and be buried, and be taken out of your sight, so that you will see me no more. But again a little while and ye shall see me; that is, on the third day I will arise again and see you again, and ye shall see me again.

[2] This is the sense according to the history, and they are very cold words if not understood in a spiritual way. Yet the Lord also comforts his disciples and says that they will be sorrowful because of his departure, but their sorrow will soon have an end. It will be with them as with a woman who lies in the pangs of childbirth; as soon as she is delivered of the child, she forgets her pain. And although this is plain and easy to understand, yet the disciples did not understand how they should fare, what the Lord meant to teach them by these words and by this parable; for such words they had never before heard. But these sayings seem simple to us now, since we often preach and apply them. Were not this the case they would be as dark to us as they were to the beloved disciples. Therefore, let us carefully examine these words and first consider what it means to go to the Father

[3] To go to the Father means nothing but to enter upon a new life. As if Christ were to say: I will leave this life of time, of the senses, of nature and of death, and will enter upon the immortal life, where the Father will make all things subject to me, where there is no sleep, no eating, no drinking, as while I lived in the body, and yet the flesh and blood, which I took from the virgin Mary, will continue. That is, I will take to myself a spiritual government to rule the hearts of believers in spirit and faith, and not found, as you imagine, a temporal kingdom. To this spiritual rulership I cannot come except by the way of death. But, as I said, the disciples did not understand it; they thought they would lose the Lord entirely when he died. Hence they fell into grief and sorrow.

[4] Now, here we must take heed, and also learn something from this, lest we read this narrative in vain. To the beloved disciples the greatest pain and sorrow were not that they should never again see the Lord in the body, but the fact that their hearts had lost the Lord was a greater distress and calamity. They were happy to behold the Lord in the body, but they clung much more to him with their hearts. Hence they also thought: If he disappears from our eyes, he will also disappear from our hearts. Just so was it with their joy. To see him again in the body was not the true joy; that they could hardly expect. But that they received him again spiritually and by faith into their hearts, as Savior and Comforter, was their true comfort and joy. For when he is believed in as the Savior, the heart rejoices, and aside from this belief there is no help, no counsel, nor any comfort at hand.

[5] This we see in the case of the beloved disciples when they fled and forsook and denied the Lord, and shockingly fell into the sin of unbelief. Then there was no longer a Savior before their eyes. Comfort had departed, Christ had fallen out of their sight, counsel and help were no longer present, and they would have had to remain in this grief and doubt forever had Christ not again caused them to rejoice; for besides this Savior there is none other. Hence, when he is removed there is no other comfort to be had, and nothing but anxiety, need, despair and hell itself must be there. This was the real anxiety, grief and sorrow of the disciples.

[6] What agony and grief, think you, they must have had when they recalled the kindness and friendship of the Lord, and the good deeds he did them, and that they were all so unfaithful to him! Then their hearts confessed: Aye, how friendly and lovingly he associated with us and showed us all exceptional love and friendship! And we have acted thus toward him, have forsaken him and are forsaken by him. Like unfaithful villains, we have denied him, have misused his teachings and grace. What will become of us? We dare not appear before God, neither can we stand before man, much less before Satan. There is now no consolation. The Savior has departed. We are in a hopeless, condemned and lost state. Observe, the beloved disciples stood in such anxiety, need and grief that no fasting, no praying, no chastisement, could have helped them. All was lost.

[7] In like manner God deals with his children today. Whenever he wants to comfort them, he first plunges them into similar anxiety and temptation. It is agony unbearable when the conscience passes sentence against one. The heart and every refuge fail and anxiety penetrates every nook of the conscience. Anguish and fear consume the marrow and bone, flesh and blood, as the prophet David often laments in his Psalms.

[8] But Christ does not let his disciples be long in such anguish and need. He had said, "And again a little while, and ye shall see me." This happened on Easter, when he appeared to them and offered them his peace, by which he comforted them and they forgot all the distress, fear and need which they had endured for the little while, until the third day. Narratives like this we should remember when we are in anguish and need, and have lost all hope of comfort. When man is troubled by an evil conscience because of his sins, the heart thinks it is eternal pain; and so it is, also, as man calculates, for he sees no end of it. He thinks God is against him and will not help him, and he himself will not allow God to help him. He looks about and finds no succor from any creature. Yea, he thinks all creatures are his enemies. Therefore, the heart soon concludes and says: Here is eternal anguish, here there will be no change, here there is

no help, no comfort. God and everything are against me. In truth it is not so, but it is only a transition. It will not last long. If we can only keep quiet for a little time, he will surely not remain away long with his comfort. This is the Lord's meaning when he here says to the disciples: "A little while and ye behold me no more," namely, when ye are steeped in anguish and trouble. "And again a little while, and ye shall see me," namely, when I shall visit you with my consolation and cause you to rejoice."

[9] Since the holy disciples experienced what it was to be overwhelmed by anguish and want, we must not think that it will be better with us. God will not make an exception in our case. But let us remember that Christ foretells to his disciples their fall, fear and sorrow, and also comforts them in order that they may not despair. Thus we should likewise comfort ourselves and allow the same to be spoken to us, so that when we are taken captive by sin and feel our consciences troubled and burdened, we do not despair; but rather remember it will not continue long. Therefore this is a very comforting Gospel to all troubled and terrified consciences. First, because Christ promises here he will not let them be captives to their misery very long; then, because he shows such kindly friendship to them — casts them not quickly from his presence, although they do not at once learn and understand his discourse; but bears with them, instructs them and deals with them most tenderly.

[10] Therefore, should a person come into like fear and misery of conscience, he ought to call to mind these words, and say: Well, a change is taking place. Christ says, A little while and ye shall see me again. It will not last long. Keep calm. It is a matter of only a short time and then Christ will permit us to see him again. But where the conscience is so terrified, one cannot grasp nor understand these words of comfort, even if he hears them. Such was the case with the disciples here. While they were in trouble they could not understand these words. It requires an effort if one is to comfort such terrified and troubled consciences. Hence the Lord uses a parable to explain his former words, in order to establish the disciples firmly in them. He takes an example of a woman in the labor of childbirth, and in such labor that she does not die from it, but brings a happy sight to the world. This is also very comforting and is spoken in order that the disciples may not despair when overtaken by temptation or fear, but may remember that, like a woman lying in travail, it will soon have an end; it is pain for only an hour or so. Christ thus, by means of this parable, makes their sorrow and trouble sweet and beautiful to his disciples.

[11] Now we must carefully consider this example. As it is here, so is it in temptation, and especially in the perils of death. Notice how God deals with a woman suffering in childbirth. There she is left alone in her pain by everybody, and no one can help her. Yea, nothing whatever is able to rescue her from her agony; that rests in the power of God alone. The midwife and others around her may indeed comfort her, but they cannot avoid the agony. She must go through it, and venture and freely hazard her life in it, not knowing whether she shall die or recover, because of the child. There she is truly in the perils of death and completely encompassed by death. This parable St. Paul also uses in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, when he tells the Thessalonians how the day of judgment will suddenly fall upon them, just like the pangs of a woman in travail, and they will not be able to escape.

[12] Just so it is also when the conscience is in agony or when one lies in the perils of death. Then neither reason nor anything else can help. No work, whether this or that. There is no comfort. You think you are forsaken by God and everybody; yea, you imagine how God and everything are against you. Then you must restrain yourself to quiet and cling only to God, who must deliver you. Besides him nothing else, neither in heaven nor upon the earth, can deliver. The same God gives his help when he thinks it is time, as he does to the woman in travail. He gives her cheer when she no longer thinks of her pain; then joy and life are where death and all distress reigned before. In like manner God makes us happy, and gives us peace and joy where before there were misery and all kinds of sorrow. Therefore, Christ here presents to us all this example, and comforts us with it, in order that we may not despair in the time of death and temptation. It is as if he wanted to say to us: Dear man, when fear, sorrow, temptation and tribulation come, doubt not, despair not. It is only for a little time. When these are over, then follow their fruits, peace and joy.

[13] In such sorrow and distress the beloved disciples were when the Lord departed from them. They were forsaken by everybody. They had no place of refuge. They stood in the gate of hell, expecting every hour to meet death; and they heard the judgment of God, thinking they had sinned and must now be given over to Satan. But immediately after his resurrection Christ comes and causes them to forget all their affliction and heart-sorrow. Then they become happy and go and bring forth fruit, and bestir themselves to help all mankind to the same joy. It is a beautiful example and a comforting passage of Scripture for all who experience temptation and trouble. Such should remember that Christ says: "A little while and ye behold me no more and again a little while, and ye shall see me," and never forget the Gospel of the woman in travail, who gladly goes through all and soon reaches the goal.

[14] This Gospel thus arms us for temptation and tribulation, and the sum of it is, that Christ the Lord reveals himself to his own as pure love and friendship, so that they are comforted. This may ever be the case with us, since we know, and from this Gospel learn, that Christ will not forsake those overwhelmed by the perils of death and the temptations of conscience, but will come and comfort them just as he does here his disciples, not leaving them long in their distress. There is truly still hope for one who is terrified in conscience and is troubled because of his sins. But when one doubts and falls into such presumption that he feels in his heart: “There is no hope for me. It cannot be otherwise. I must be condemned. There is no help nor comfort left, do as I will” — when man is brought to this and hazards everything, it is a terrible fall. May almighty God ever protect us against such a fall! Though the sin be ever so great, if only one does not doubt he will be in no trouble. God will surely rescue him in his own good time.

[15] Thus, you have heard here of two kinds of sorrow: The first, that of the disciple when deprived of the bodily presence of Christ; the other, our own, when his spiritual presence departs from our hearts. The first sorrow Christ removed by his resurrection; the other he removes when he causes the conscience again to rejoice. Of this he here speaks further, and says: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: ye shall be sorrowful but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.” And immediately following the parable he adds: “And ye therefore now have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one taketh away from you.”

[16] Here the Lord means the joy with which the conscience is again comforted and made to rejoice when Christ becomes known as a Savior. For then sorrow, sin, death, hell and all misfortune vanish. And this is not a worldly joy, as the world rejoices, sings and dances over success, but it is a heavenly and eternal true joy before God, and truly well pleasing to God. Of this joy the prophet says in Psalm 68:3: “But let the righteous be glad; yea, let them rejoice with gladness.” And Christ says here to his disciples: “And your joy no one taketh away from you.” How does this come about? Thus: When Christ stands again before your eyes, and the conscience finds that it possesses the Lord, from whom it expects everything good, then nothing more can be done for him; for who will harm the heart that is thus established upon Christ? Of what should one be afraid as long as he can say: My Lord Jesus Christ is Lord over all things; over death, hell, Satan, and over everything in heaven and upon earth? As St. Paul also defiantly boasts in Romans 8:31-39. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how

shall he not also with him freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Even as it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; We were accounted as sheep for the slaughter. (Psalm 44:23). Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

[17] These were the words of St. Paul. In the same spirit David also speaks in Psalm 27:1-3, and says: "Jehovah is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Jehovah is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers came upon me to eat up my flesh, even mine adversaries and my foes, they stumbled and fell. Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, even then will I be confident." And in Psalm 23:1-4 he says: "Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters, he restoreth my soul: he guideth me into the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

[18] Behold, how courageous and defiant is this man! Who gave him such a valiant and defiant courage? or whence did it come to him? From the Savior alone. And the more we are driven from him, the more we cling to him. The more injury, misfortune and sorrow people cause us, the more we rejoice, for this joy is eternal; and the more they tear us from it, the greater it becomes.

[19] Now the question may be asked, can one fall from this joy? Yes. And as soon as we fall, eternal pain is at hand, out of which, although it is in its nature eternal, yet God rescues his own. Thus the joy continues forever, but as long as the person is upon the earth he may fall from it. You should understand it thus: Christ is my Savior, if so, believe and confess. This joy is to me an eternal joy so far as I remain in it. But when Christ departs out of the heart, then the joy also departs. The grace continues, but the conscience can easily fall. I tell you this to the end that you may not be offended in the future, when many of you shall fall from the

Gospel and deny Christ. For wherever Christ shall be with his joy and comfort, there the cross and persecution are also soon at hand. But I fear we have neither the joy nor the persecution, since we so little appropriate the Gospel. We continue ever in our old nature and despise the dear and precious treasure of the Gospel; therefore God will visit us with greater punishment than he did the Jews, namely, with blindness and error. As Paul says to the Thessalonians: “And for this cause God sendeth them a working of error, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. For God cannot allow his Gospel to be disgraced. That one should stumble he will indeed allow, but for one thus to despise his mercy he will not permit, and it is not right that he should. Therefore, it is to be feared that heresy and working of error will come, so that no one will know what is the trouble, as is already evident and will become still more so. May God restrain Satan and save us from such a visitation! Amen.

SOURCE

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