

Suffering Now, Joy to Come

William Cwirla

John 16:12–22

Present suffering gives way to future joy. Darkness gives way to light. Sadness gives way to joy. Death gives way to life. Weeping remains for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning of the resurrection. Such is the way of life under the cross of Jesus. Now there is suffering and tears and sorrow. But in the end, there is comfort and laughter and joy. Present suffering, future glory.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Paul knew suffering. His life was marked by suffering – imprisonments, beatings, rejection by his own people, expulsion from the synagogue, antagonists and false teachers, congregation problems, health problems – you name it, Paul likely experienced it. So this was no empty pat on the head, “There, there it will all get better.” Paul died in a Roman prison. Things did not “get better” for him, in this present life. From the time he wrote the book of Romans, they got worse.

Things were bad for John on the island of Patmos too. His churches were under siege. Christians were being tortured and martyred. False teachers were worming their way into the churches deceiving Christians with their seductive lies. The fabric of society was coming apart at the seams. Government was corrupt, the family was weakened, immorality reigned. Everyone did whatever they thought was right in their own eyes. I’m not talking about our day. I’m talking about the 1st century, the time of Paul and Peter and John.

John’s comforting vision in the Revelation was a new creation – a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and first earth had passed away. The old creation had worn out and died. The Sea, the image of Death and the Grave, was no more. What John saw was a city unlike any city that ever was on this earth. A holy city. New Jerusalem. Not the Jerusalem of this present time in which there is so much conflict and violence, where peace has to be maintained at the tip of a sword. Heavenly Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, “from

above,” from God, from where your Baptismal birth comes. You are born “from above” by water and Spirit. You are citizens of God’s city.

Everything that troubled John, all the pain and suffering and anguish of a life lived in service under the cross of Jesus, is set right and redeemed and raised up for good in God’s holy city. Everything that John preached and believed and hoped for is made visible in this new creation that is free from Sin and Death.

The dwelling place of God is with Man. Now that dwelling place is in Christ, who brings divinity and humanity together and reconciled them in His own flesh. Remember what Jesus said. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again.” The temple to which He was referring was the temple of His body. In the flesh of Christ, God and Man are reconciled. Peace is restored. Sin that divided is swept away in the great “it is finished” of the cross. God and Man are one in Christ, and in the new creation that Christ brings, and in the city that is His bride, the dwelling place of God is with man. No more tears, no more Death, no mourning and grief, no weeping and pain. Those will be past and done when the former things have passed away and the Lamb who was slain but lives makes all things new.

The sufferings of this present age do not compare with the glory to be revealed. That’s the pattern of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. It’s the pattern of the Church in this world. It’s the pattern of every baptized believer in Christ. Present sufferings, future glory.

As Jesus looked deeply into the faces of His disciples that night in the upper room at the table, He saw uncertainty, fear, doubt, sadness. Jesus was speaking of His impending death and resurrection. In a little while, they would no longer see Him. The stone would be rolled in front of his tomb and He would be seen no more. The world would rejoice as the disciples wept. They would be sorrowful. But their sorrow would turn to joy, Jesus told them. “Again, a little while, and you will see me.” They did see Him, risen from the dead. Good Friday anguish turned into Easter morning joy with the news, “Christ is risen”. And all the darkness and death of that previous Friday was swallowed up in joy and light. Jesus was alive. He had risen. You may wonder why Jesus didn’t just tell the disciples this plainly. Why not simply say, “I’m going to die and rise on the third day”? Well, actually, He did say that at least three times, but it didn’t seem to register. Here Jesus says it another way, a way that we can hear it too for ourselves and take it to heart. It means as much to us as it means to the disciples in that upper room. “In a little while, you will not see me, and then again a little while and you will see me.”

You can't see Jesus now. He's been glorified to the right hand of His Father. He's very "here", that is "present." He still dwells among us as the Word become flesh. He is present and active in His Word, in Baptism, in the Supper. He can be heard through His office of preaching. The Spirit He sends is busy delivering forgiveness, life, and salvation to our ears. We simply can't see Him for a little while.

This calls for faith. What you can't see, you must believe. Trust. We must take Jesus at His Word. Just as the disciples were caught between the "now" of not seeing and the "not yet" of seeing, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, so we too find ourselves caught between the "not seeing" of Ascension Day and the "seeing" of Resurrection Day. The Last Days. The "end times".

Our time is the time between the old and new creation. The old order of things is passing away. We sense it all around us in the breakdown of everything from the environment to social structures to our own bodies. Expanding on the seventh petition of the Our Father in the Small Catechism, Luther described this life as a "vale of tears," a valley of sorrow, what Psalm 23 calls "the valley of the shadow of Death". That's a piece of reality we need to understand and take to heart. There may be joy in this life, but it's fleeting. It quickly evaporates and turns to bitterness. There may be peace in this life, but it's always a tenuous peace. There may be laughter in this life, but it is a laughter that quickly returns to weeping.

We weep over our sin, our sinful condition, what sin has done to this world we live in. We weep over broken friendships, broken families, and broken lives. We weep over the state of the church, over our struggling congregations, over the seeming loss of vitality that once seemed to invigorate the church. We weep over the loss of loved ones and we say farewell to them in this life and stand at their graves not seeing but believing.

Whenever there is "not seeing", there will be sorrow and longing. Think about being separated from someone you love for a long time. You long to see them. Hearing is fine and letters are nice, but you long to see them. The families of deployed soldiers know this. Look at the joy of their reunions when they get to see Dad or Mom again after a long time apart.

Jesus compared the "now" and the "not yet" to the difference between the labor pains of delivery and the joy that a child has been born into the world. The pains of childbirth are great. They are, in many ways, a death. In some cases, mothers still do die in childbirth. And yet in the end, all the pain and sorrow and tears give way to joy.

“...She no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.” I know what you mothers are thinking. You’re thinking, “Only a man could possibly say this.” You don’t forget the pain. But the pain of delivery is brought into a new context of life. And that’s what makes the difference. Present suffering has its context in future joy and glory. The pain and tears of this life have their meaning and purpose in the resurrection, in the dawning age when we will see once again with resurrected clarity.

“You will have sorrow now.” Jesus said that to His disciples on the eve of His death. They would sorrow deeply. He says these words to you as well. You will have sorrow now. But that sorrow is woven into a greater and more beautiful tapestry than you could ever imagine. “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” That’s what awaits you and all who trust in Christ. You will see Jesus on the day of His appearing, the Last Day of the old creation, the First and only Day of the new. You will see Him whom you do not now see, and you will rejoice with unending joy. The Bible begins in the beginning with God creating the heavens and the earth. The story of our humanity begins in a garden with two people, Adam and Eve. But the Bible ends not with a return to the garden but with a city that God is building, a city that comes down from above, where the dwelling of God is with humanity. That says something very important. History – the world’s history, humanity’s history, your history – for all its sorrows and wrongs and brokenness and sin is not erased but redeemed. God doesn’t annihilate this creation into non-existence. He brings it through death and then raises it up. Death and resurrection. That’s how Jesus “makes all things new”. He takes all things into His own mortal flesh and He dies and rises. He takes this old creation that is passing away and He lets it die and then raises it up again. He takes all the flotsam and jetsam of history, including your own history, and washing it in His blood, redeems it with His death and raises it up for eternal good in the resurrection.

That means nothing of your life is ever lost. It’s redeemed and held for you in a complete and whole way in Christ. The mother doesn’t forget her labor pains. Instead they are woven into the lovely and wonderful tapestry that is her child. Our present sufferings do not compare with the glory that will be revealed to us. In the light of Christ and His death and resurrection, it all makes sense. It all fits together. And the vision truly will be glorious.

“You will have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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