

John 16:16-24 – “A Surprising Transformation”

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Intro: When WWII came to an end, there were massive crowds of people flooding the streets of our great cities celebrating the victory. You’ve doubtless seen the pictures: happy faces, joyful dancing, a sailor running down the street kissing any woman he encountered. War brings sorrow. But when victory comes, sorrow is transformed into joy.

Proposition: Through Christ’s victory, the believer’s sorrow transforms into joy.

Our study tonight will center on three points: (vv.16-18) A Mysterious Saying; (vv.19-22) A Surprising Transformation; (vv.23-24) A New Name for Asking.

(vv.16-18) A Mysterious Saying – After speaking to the disciples about the coming and work of the Holy Spirit in verses 4b-15, Jesus returned to the subject of His imminent departure in verses 16-24. His words to the disciples about this in verse 16 caused complete confusion in the minds of the disciples as verses 17 and 18 show: **John 16:16–18 - 16** *“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”* **17** *So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?”* **18** *So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.”*

Jesus’ statement in verse 16 seems to be intentionally vague. What did He mean by, *“a little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me”*? Even today, this saying causes a difference of opinion among students of the Word. There seem to be three different ways to understand what Jesus was saying:

- One possibility is that Jesus was referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit. He had just been speaking of that in the preceding verses. However, this seems unlikely because Jesus never confused Himself with the Holy Spirit. He always carefully distinguished Himself from the Comforter, so it seems unlikely that He was blurring the lines between His coming back to the disciples and the predicted coming of the Holy Spirit to them after His resurrection.
- A second possibility is that He was speaking of His immediate resurrection, three days hence. He would be taken away from them that very night and they would know a profound time of sorrow because of this, but their sorrow would be turned to joy when He was raised from the dead and reappeared to them. This understanding fits well with what Jesus describes a little further on in verse 20.
- A third possibility is that Jesus had His second coming in mind. This makes sense as well in the light of verse 20 and its application to all the saints that have lived between the first coming of the Lord and His second coming. That would be you and me! Don’t we sorrow now for the brokenness we see around us in this present world? And won’t our sorrow be turned to joy when Jesus returns to put things right?

So, which of these three possibilities is most likely what Jesus meant? I think we can safely conclude that the second and third understandings are most likely, but here’s the thing: Jesus statement in verse 16 was obviously intentionally vague and was intended to cause uncertainty and questions among His disciples. If this were not so, why wouldn’t He have stated the matter in a more understandable way? Could it be that God intends there to be some mysteries that only become clear in the light of eventual actions He brings about?

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[DOCTRINAL POINT] There are some things that God leaves mysteriously covered until His actions remove all uncertainty.

[ILLUSTRATION] Do you like to read murder mysteries? Some folks love to, you know! J. Vernon McGhee, a favorite Bible teacher of many of us, liked to retreat to his room between sessions at Bible conferences and bury himself in a good mystery novel. There is something enjoyable about trying to sort out the clues and figure out “who done it” when you’re reading a mystery. I’m a complete dunce when it comes to getting to the right conclusion in these matters, but I don’t feel too badly about that. Jesus gave this mysterious saying to His disciples two thousand years ago, and theologians are still trying to sort it out today!

[APPLICATION] Don’t you find this encouraging? I certainly do. I find it encouraging because it tells us that Jesus’ disciples were nobody special when it came to understanding what Jesus said. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that you have to be someone especially gifted to understand the Scriptures, but here we find the disciples themselves being totally flummoxed by what Jesus told them. It’s interesting to note when we read this, that Jesus never gave them a direct answer to their question. He didn’t need to. He knew that when God moved, either at the resurrection or through the second coming, the answers would become perfectly clear to everyone who believes. Avoid the trap of thinking that you have to be able to figure it all out ahead of time! When God is ready for you to know the answer, He’ll bring it to pass in such a way that you won’t be able to miss what He’s saying.

(vv.19-22) A Surprising Transformation – Jesus knew that His disciples were puzzled by what He had just said to them and that they wanted to ask Him for an explanation. But they didn’t. Why didn’t they? Most probably because they were intimidated and didn’t want to look dumb in front of the Teacher! So, Jesus raised their question for them, but rather than giving them the answer, He pointed them instead to a principle of inestimable value. **John 16:19–22** - **19** *Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’?”* **20** *Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.* **21** *When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.* **22** *So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.* Instead of answering their question, Jesus raised another: “You are sad because I’m going away. What will God do with your sadness? Will He let you stew in it? Will He give you something else to replace it? Or will He resolve it some other way?” And then He gave them the answer: “He will do none of those things. He will transform your sorrow into joy.” Because of Christ’s victory, God now specializes in transforming our sorrows into joy.

Jesus explained this through a prophecy wrapped around an illustration. The prophecy is in verses 20 and 22: **20** *Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy....* **22** *So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.* The prophecy may be taken as referring to the immediate future of Christ’s resurrection or the distant future of His Second Coming, as has been explained. Either way, the point is the same: Christ’s disciples would weep, while the world rejoiced. But when Christ returned to them, everything would be transformed. This literally came true on Resurrection Sunday and someday will again be fulfilled when Jesus breaks through the clouds in His return. The world of Jesus’ day celebrated its apparent victory over Him when He breathed His last on the Cross. His crushed disciples trembled in the shadow of the cross until the morning dawned and the

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tomb was found empty. That evening, all their sorrow was transformed into rejoicing as John 20:19-20 tell us: **John 20:19–20 - 19** *On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”* **20** *When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.* Suddenly, all their sorrows transformed into joy. And that’s what God does for us because of Christ’s victory.

Jesus wrapped this prophecy around an illustration explaining the principle: **John 16:21 - 21** *When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.* There are two aspects to the truth that are revealed through this example. First, new life turns sorrow into joy. The new life that comes from putting one’s faith in Jesus changes everything. The whole world runs backwards. Everything in our past that we’re ashamed of, everything in our past that brought us sorrow takes on a new appearance in light of our ultimate rescue by the risen Christ. Secondly, Christ’s metaphor of childbirth draws our attention closely to the fact that this change is not a replacement, but rather a transformation: The same child that causes sorrow and pain, also causes joy and rejoicing.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Because of Christ’s victory, our sorrows are now transformed into joy.

[ILLUSTRATION] Does it seem to you that Christ’s return is taking a long time to get here? Are you sorrowing in your heart at the sin and brokenness you witness all around our world? Are you wondering in your heart if justice will ever be restored; violence ended; poverty erased; and relationships healed? If so, remind yourself that because of Christ’s victory a day will come when all this and more will be put right, and our sorrows will turn to joy.

[APPLICATION] Let’s let Warren Wiersbe give us the application for this point: “While the immediate application may have been to the sorrowing hearts of the disciples, the ultimate application is to all of God’s people as they await the coming of Jesus Christ. To us, it seems like a long wait, but God does not measure time as we do (see 2 Peter 3). But while we are waiting, we must deal with our trials and hurts on the basis of *transformation* and not *substitution*, if we expect to mature in the Christian life.” What does Wiersbe mean by this? He means that our temptation is to get relief from our sorrows by substituting something else in their place. We try to substitute pleasures for pains, wealth for poverty, laughter for tears, today for tomorrow. But this will never work. When we await patiently the transforming day of Christ’s return, we endure today’s sorrows and grow more mature in our Faith (cf. Romans 5:3-5).¹

(vv.23-24) A New Name for Asking – Jesus closed this section of His discourse by pointing His disciples to the central role prayer would play in their lives after His resurrection and return to the Father. **John 16:23–24 - 23** *In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.* **24** *Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.* As their teacher and leader, Jesus had supplied all the needs of His disciples during their time together. Now that He was leaving, He pointed away from Himself and toward their heavenly Father. The interplay of two Greek words, both translated “ask” in our English Bibles is informative. When Jesus said, “*In that day you will ask me nothing*,” the Greek word translated “ask” means “to ask a question” from an equal. Later in the verse when He said, “*whatever you ask of*

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament Vol 1.* (1989) Page: 365. David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, Co.

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the Father in my name,” the word translated as “ask” means, “to request a favor from a superior.” What is the meaning of these things? First, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples would no longer need to ask Him any more questions. The answers they sought would be given in His resurrection. Secondly, after Jesus’ departure to the Father, Jesus’ disciples would have a new privilege: they would be able to come to the Father directly, in “His name” – in His character, and with His authority, in other words. How would this be possible? Because of their union with Him through the Spirit’s indwelling presence. Their new privilege would be to come directly to the Father, asking for anything they needed for His work, confident in the Father’s willingness to say, “O yes!” to their requests.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Because of Christ’s victory, we have the privilege of asking and receiving much in prayer.

[ILLUSTRATION] In the old days when small store owners extended credit to their clients based on nothing more than personal recognition, it was not unusual for a parent to send a child to the store to get some needed article and have it charged to the family’s account. The store owner understood that the child had been sent for the goods “in the name of” the parent. Because Jesus has won the victory on Calvary, each believer now has the privilege of going to the Owner of the Great Supply Store of Heaven and drawing out in Jesus’ name all that is needed for completing Jesus’ work on earth.

[APPLICATION] Bishop Ryle points out that for believer’s today, this should not be seen merely as a privilege but now as a way of life. Listen to Ryle’s encouragement to pray, written over 100 years ago, but still fresh and vital today: “Let the lesson sink down deeply into our hearts. Of all the list of Christian duties there is none to which there is such abounding encouragement as prayer. It is a duty which concerns all. High and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned – all must pray. It is a duty for which all are accountable. All cannot read, or hear, or sing; but all who have the spirit of adoption can pray. Above all, it is a duty in which everything depends on the heart and motive within. Our words may be feeble and ill-chosen, and our language broken and ungrammatical, and unworthy to be written down. But if the heart be right, it matters not. He that sits in heaven can spell out the meaning of every petition sent up in the name of Jesus, and can make the asker know and feel that he receives.”² Brothers, we have a great privilege. Let us pray!

Conclusion: When Jesus spoke the words of our text, His disciples heard them in the shadow of the cross. His departure was at hand. Their world was rapidly spinning out of control. He told them, “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me,” and they looked at each other and wondered, “What in the world does He mean.” 72 hours later they knew, and His victory turned every one of their sorrows into pure joy. You and I await that same kind of turning. And come it will for Christ’s victory is still with us.

² Ryle, J. C., *John*, Vol. 3. (2015) Page: 115. The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA.