



THE PEACE OF THE ROCK

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 16:16-33

36th Message

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The holiday season is upon us. I trust your Thanksgiving was restful and warm. The long weekend reminded me once more that, because of my background, I tend to expect too much from holidays, especially Christmas. For many of us, Christmas is a time of fantastic expectations and heart-breaking disappointments. We want a Currier and Ives Christmas, but we end up with one that resembles "As the World Turns"!

Christmas is not a cure-all. It will not put an end to the problems of our world, the problems in our families or those that lie within ourselves. It may inspire a truce between warring nations, but 24 hours without violence can hardly be called peace on earth. Although the season inspires charitable impulses that can genuinely help people, the problems of poverty, injustice, and alienation continue throughout the holidays; in fact, they are often exacerbated by the season itself. We want our families to be close and loving at this if at no other time, but Christmas does not magically bring this about. Our teenagers are still uncouth; dad is still hopelessly neurotic; grandmother still hates living in a nursing home; and young children still whine for toys and candy. Christmas does not solve any of these problems; in fact, it often becomes a harsh spotlight that illuminates our fractured families, exposing their brokenness and pain. Christmas reminds us that life is tough.

We have been learning in Jesus' Upper Room Discourse from the gospel of John that there is no lasting joy in this world. There is nothing here on earth that can meet our deep longings. In his remarks, our Lord is preparing his disciples for life in the world without his visible presence. He is leaving, they are staying, and he didn't want them to have the Pollyanna-like view of life that everything was going to be just fine. It wouldn't. In the world, he told them, they would face tribulation. They would be confronted with hatred and hostility.

We left Jesus and his disciples as they were making their way from the Upper Room down through the narrow streets of Jerusalem. They were about to cross over the Kidron Valley, ascend up to the Mount of Olives, and into the darkness of Gethsemane's Garden. Jesus has been assuring them that despite his impending departure, every contingency had been covered, and plans for their well-being secured. They were upset and confused, but more than anything else, they were still not prepared to face the acute grief of his impending crucifixion. But Jesus forces them to come to terms with it. The Spirit would come, but first would come the cross. They would once again experience deep intimacy with the their exalted Lord, but first would come the cross. The Spirit would teach them, but first would come the cross.

In his last utterances to his disciples now, Jesus leaves them with words of assurance that would speak to their

deepest needs: He promises them joy, love, and peace. We pick up his words in 16:16:

"A little while, and you will no longer behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me."

What a strange, puzzling statement: "I am going to disappear, and you will never see me again, but in a little while you will see me."

{Some} of His disciples therefore said to one another, "What is this thing He is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" And so they were saying, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is talking about."

I have always wanted to teach like Jesus, and in this passage I have found a point of identification, at least. When I teach, people often say, "I don't know what he is talking about"! Here, on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples engage in what amounts to the first ever inductive Bible study: they try to figure out the meaning of a statement of Jesus. Our Lord allows the discussion to continue, but as it was generating more heat than light, he breaks in:

Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not behold Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'?"

The disciples are afraid to ask him to clarify his words. They are still reeling from his statement that one of them will betray him and that Peter will deny him. They are feeling what we feel in a classroom on occasion when we think we should know something but we don't. Instead of raising our hand and asking the instructor, thereby exposing our ignorance, we ask the person sitting next to us to explain what has been said. How well Jesus knows the disciples. How quickly he discerns the problem they are facing.

But he replies to their need, not to their question:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy. Whenever a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child has been born into the world. Therefore you too now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you."

Jesus answers their question by means of an analogy. The "little while," says Jesus, covers a period of time when he would not be seen, a time marked by sorrow; and then, following that, another time when he would be seen again, a time which would be joyful.

Jesus is intentionally ambiguous. His words suggest not just one, but probably three meanings. First, his statement clearly refers to his death and resurrection. He did indeed go away in the flesh. He was crucified, and lay in the tomb three days, and those were days of deep sorrow and despair. But in a little while the disciples did see him again (on that joyful resurrection morning), with the marks of his crucifixion still visible on his now glorified body. Secondly, the "little while" could be referring to the period before and after Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. (In fact, Jesus used this phrase, "in a little while, you will see me," in chapter 14, to refer to the coming of the Holy Spirit.) That is the Spirit's ministry: to indwell us, and to make the risen Lord Jesus real and visible to us in a spiritual way. Thirdly, the "little while" could refer to the entire church age, this short time we are living in when we do not "see" Jesus with our physical eyes. It is a time of sorrow, but when it is over, the Lord will return in glory. We will see him face to face, and all of earth's sorrows will be transmuted into eternal joy.

Had you and I been present, those would have been our concerns as well. These are the questions we always ask, aren't they? "Why?" and "How long?" But notice that our Lord's answer completely ignores the matter of time. He repeats their questions so they that they know he has heard and understood their concerns, but he never answers them directly. His reply stresses the process, and the result that is certain to follow. He makes clear to them that a period of sorrow is inevitable. He cannot spare them from it. There will be a time when they will weep and lament and be sorrowful, and the world around them will be rejoicing. "But," he says, "your sorrow will be turned into joy." How long it would take was insignificant; what was important was the inevitable result.

Notice the point that Jesus makes when he says, "your sorrow will turn into joy." He doesn't say, "After you have suffered much sorrow, then I will give you some joy." That would be sequence: joy following sorrow. No, what he is referring to is consequence: "the thing that is causing your sorrow will be the very thing that will cause your joy." The sorrow would not be replaced by joy; it would turn into joy.

Jesus uses an apt illustration to make his point. Many of us have witnessed the birth of a baby, and the women present this morning who have given birth can testify that the pain of childbirth is almost unbearable. But when the baby is born, that same mother's face which earlier was creased with pain, is now a picture of joy and gladness, even glory. What was it that caused the anguish? The baby. What is it that now causes the joy? The same baby! These words that I clipped from a magazine article say it well:

There is one ward in a hospital where moans are most likely to assault your ears. Young women writhe in severe pain, but the doctors resist giving them sedatives. The problem is obvious to the eye. These women are suffering from gigantic growths which swell their stomachs to the size of beach balls. Their taut skin glistens. As the hours pass, the women's faces grow increasingly worn with pain. If they were there with any other diagnosis, the scene would cut your heart. Instead, you may feel great joy in a maternity ward. The view from the end is a baby. Because they know this, the women rarely despair in their pain. They may feel as much pain as a woman in the same hospital with stomach cancer, but they look confidently toward the end, a joyful end. Later, they will not even be able to remember how the process felt. [Obviously, this was written by a man!]

The very thing that was causing such grief for the disciples (namely, the cross), would ultimately prompt their joy — and their joy could not be taken away.

That is what Jesus is saying here. God is a specialist in turning sorrow into joy. He takes the very things that cause our hearts to ache and turns them into a cause for joy. But, unlike us, he is not concerned with how long the process takes.

A number of years ago, I read the story of Dr. R.A. Torrey, who was the founder of what is now Biola University, the undergraduate school of the seminary I attended. Dr. Torrey was a great Bible teacher and a godly man. He and his wife went through a time of tremendous pain and sorrow when their 12-year-old daughter died. The funeral was held on a miserable, rainy day. As they watched their daughter's coffin being lowered into the ground their pain was immense, even though they knew that their little Elizabeth was with the Lord and not in that box. Dr. Torrey said that the next day the whole matter broke over him anew: the loneliness of the years ahead without her presence, the heartbreak of an empty house, and all the other implications of her death. So burdened with grief was he that he cried out to God for help. I want to read his words to you:

And just then this fountain, the Holy Spirit, that I had in my heart, broke forth with such power as I think I had never experienced before, and it was the most joyful moment I had ever known in my life! Oh! how wonderful is the joy of the Holy Spirit! It is an unspeakably glorious thing to have your joy not in things about you, not even in your most dearly loved friends, but to have within you a fountain ever springing up, springing up, springing up, always springing up, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, springing up under all circumstances unto everlasting life!

That is what Jesus is talking about here: the alchemy of the Spirit takes the things which cause pain and transmutes them into joy. It may take some time — it is a process: there will sorrow and tears and great pain — but the promise of Scripture is that the things that you wish you were free of are the very things that are making you into what you long to be.

"Your sorrow will turn into joy." How did Jesus do that for the disciples? He tells them: "in a little while, you will see me." It was seeing the Lord that made the difference. That is always the case. Sorrow is not turned into joy by coming up with answers to the problems of life, but rather by getting a new glimpse of the Lord, seeing a new facet of his character, another dimension of his grace, garnering new insights into his love and provision for us.

That is why it is all linked to prayer. Jesus continues:

"And in that day [in the day when the Spirit comes] you will ask Me no question. [You don't need to come and ask me anything. You will not settle your curiosity or your confusion by coming to me; you can go to the Father."] Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name [They had not asked the Father in his name]; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full [the thing that once brought so much sorrow will be turned into joy]."

That is what the pain and disappointments of this life were meant to do — to drive us to God. Knowing God is the only thing that truly satisfies in life.

And trusting prayer is the process that leads to joy. God is the only one who can turn your sorrow into joy, so go to him. Tell him about your pain and your confusion: the positive biopsies that have shattered your dreams; the unexpected loss of your job that fills you with fear for tomorrow; the unfaithful spouse who rips your heart to pieces; the rebellious children who provoke unimaginable pain; the demanding job that keeps you moving at a frantic, health-threatening pace; the battles with self-hatred that make mention of your identity in Christ sound like mockery; the memories of past abuse that haunt your every waking moment; the consuming loneliness that covers your soul like a fog. Tell God about these things. Don't suppress them. If you do, you will never know joy, because you will have taken responsibility for your well-being. God is the only one who can take the vision of what we have sought to aspire to and bring it to pass. Augustine said, "There is no true virtue without a miracle. Any progress we make toward authentic goodness is the product of our association with Him. We must again and again come to Him with our desires and lofty ideals and lay them at His feet." We must bring before him our weakness, our shame, our compulsions, our doubts, our fears, our misjudgments, our weariness, our staleness, and ask him to make us complete.

The process of transmuting sorrow into joy, however, oftentimes involves pain that seems unendurable. But we must be willing to bear suffering, not knowing when it will end, and without the means to arrange for its relief. What we must do in our pain is pray, asking the Father to reveal to us the sheer beauty of the character of Christ. And though God may not change our circumstances — he may not choose to answer our questions — he will meet our need: He will change us. As we give him our sorrow, he will turn it to joy.

Not only are we promised joy, we are promised the security of love as well. Verse 25:

"These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. In that day [the day of the Spirit, the day in which we live] you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father.

Why don't we take our sorrow and pain to God? It is because we are not sure that he cares. We have given up on the fact that God is good, and we have taken responsibility for our own well-being. To this, Jesus says, "I want you to know a great truth: the Father himself loves you, not because you have behaved, but simply because you believe." Here is the bedrock on which all of life rests: the undeserved love of God because of Jesus. The Father loves us simply because we love his Son.

A few weeks ago, one of my son's good friends knocked on our front door. When I opened it, he looked up at me with a smile on his face, and said, "Mr. Vanderet, will you buy a gift check book to support our soccer team?" He is one of my son's best friends. He knew when he knocked at the door that I would buy a book. Of course I would buy a

book from him. Jesus wants us to know this: We have a direct relationship to the Father, and his love toward us is the same as it was toward his Son. The disciples were very much aware of this marvelous, unique relationship that Jesus had with his Father. He had a trust, dependence, fellowship, and communion with the Father that they knew nothing about. They relied on Jesus to obtain for them any favor or privilege with the Father. Now, Jesus says, in effect, "You are no longer to look upon yourselves as separated from the Father, or that I have a special link that you can't know. The Father himself loves you directly, just as he loves me."

Dave Roper spent a day with our staff recently. It was a wonderful day, and a significant time for me personally, as he shared his journey of discovering the love of God through the pain of his own life. He read for us a poem in which the poet describes his life in terms of a lump of clay on a potter's wheel. God's fingers are forming a cup from what the poet called this "lump of plastic circumstance." The poet asks, "What is the cup for?" He replies, "For uses of the cup, look up." In other words, you have to look up, not down, to see what God is making the cup for. The poet asks, "He is the all consuming cup. Why would he need another?" Then comes the answer: "He is making the cup to slake his thirst." What a wonderful picture. All your life, God has been thirsting for you, lonely for you. He can't get his mind off you. He longs for you. He wants you to be in relationship with him. And he is making you into a being that can reciprocate his love. All the "plastic circumstances" of your life, the hurt, the pain, the divorces, the losses of loved ones, all are part of God's working, God's fingers, his loving hands, shaping you into a cup to slake his thirst so that he can delight in you and enjoy you forever. The Father loves you!

Jesus continues:

"I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father." His disciples said, "Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God."

Hear the confidence in the disciples' words here. Jesus states the bare facts of the incarnation: "I came from the Father; I came into the world; I am leaving the world; I am going back to the Father," and the disciples, as it were, suddenly brighten up, nod their heads and say, "Got it! Now we see it. You really are who you claimed to be. You don't need our questions to find out what's in our hearts. You know our hearts. You really are God, aren't you?" They are attempting to assure the Lord that they finally understand and that he can count on them.

Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? Behold, an hour is coming, and has {already} come, for you to be scattered, each to his own {home,} and to leave Me alone; and {yet} I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Jesus is saying, in effect, "You think you know the truth. You have it in your heads, but you haven't got it yet in your hearts. Within an hour, Peter, you are going to be slashing away with your sword, contradicting everything have I

taught you, and the rest of you are going to run for home and hide behind locked doors while I face my trial alone. That is how dependable you are." But he assures them that it is all right. His final word to them is this: "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

It is out of weakness that we become strong. Though we fail and falter, he has a way of correcting our mistakes, healing our foolishness, and bringing everything to pass in his time. "I know you don't get it," Jesus is telling them, in effect. "I know it's hard to learn to operate this way; you will make mistakes. But, take courage, cheer up. I have overcome the world. I can even use your mistakes to advance my cause." When I was building an addition onto my house, my good friend, Dale Real, who is a retired building contractor, would come over all the time and show me how to accomplish different projects. Then, as he was leaving, to encourage me he would always say, "Remember, there is nothing you can do that I can't fix!" That is what Jesus is saying here. We will make it, not because we are so smart and we can figure everything out, or because we have good friends who can bail us out of our problems. Our strength lies in the fact that Jesus has overcome the world. Isaac Walton said, "It is the fiddler, and not the fiddle stick, that makes the music."

And waiting is part of the process. Growth is rarely swift and painless; often it is subject to delay. Our personalities resist change, flawed as they are by nature and our own indulgence. But in spite of our failures we can be assured that our conversion is going on every day. We are in recovery, gradually being delivered from evil. God is working even now toward that distant end. Today we are becoming what we shall one day inevitably be. So we must "wait for God's silent molding, wait for his full unfolding." We must believe that God's processes are adequate to deal with our sin. And, as one man put it, "we must be comfortable with ourselves in process." When we look at our lives, we see much that needs to be done, but we have to realize that we are under construction. The work is incomplete, but the process is inexorable.

How encouraging are these marvelous summary words of Jesus. Love, joy, and peace are our inheritance. These are the fruit of the Spirit, aren't they? *His joy*. Despite circumstances, our sorrow turned into joy. *His love*. The Father's own love, his tender care, his loving provision. *His peace*. His sense of security which rests not in circumstances, nor in the understanding of them, but in the confidence that the One who is guiding them knows what he is doing. He is the very source of our peace.

I want to close by sharing with you a story. Horatio Spafford was an attorney who lived in Chicago at the turn of the century. He was a dynamic Christian man who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871, Spafford put his wife and four children aboard a ship and sent them to Europe as he wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As the ship was crossing the Atlantic Ocean it was struck by another vessel in the middle of the night, and both ships sank. Mrs. Spafford saw her four children drown. She herself was struck by a falling beam, but she was miraculously saved from drowning when she fell on some floating debris. She was rescued and taken to a hospital in Wales. She telegraphed back to her husband, saying but two words: "Saved alone." Horatio Spafford took the first available ship to Wales. As the vessel neared the area in the Atlantic where his children had been lost, he walked along the deck, contemplating all that had happened. It was then that he was moved to write the hymn that we sang earlier this morning, *It Is Well With My Soul* :

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."*

That is the message Jesus wants to communicate to us this morning. Whatever my circumstances, you have taught me to say, "It is well with my soul." That is the key to contentment, the secret that enables us to rest. Joy is not found in the absence of suffering, but in the presence of God.

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