

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Sorrow and Joy

John 16:16-22

Intro: There are 2 kinds of people in this world – those who can wake up and say, “Good morning, Lord!” and then there are those who wake up and can only say, “Good Lord, its morning!” Are you one of those people who always wake up with a smile on your face and a song in your heart? Not me, not at all. I’m the kind that says, “Don’t speak to me until I’ve had my coffee” and I don’t even drink coffee! So, when I read verses like **Ps 30:5b** that says, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning,” I have to take it in a poetical sense because it’s rarely been my personal experience. But, even in poetical language, it’s worth trying to understand this principle because the idea of joy coming after a nighttime of sorrow is an important biblical theme. We have it right here in our text today (**vs20**).

The rest of **ch16** concludes the Upper Room Discourse. In it, Jesus deals primarily with the emotions of the disciples. We’ve seen that they were discouraged and despondent at the news that Jesus would soon be leaving them, they were confused by some of His teachings and they were also afraid. They were already having a rough night but it was going to get a lot worse! It’s encouraging to see that the disciples were real, ordinary men with real, ordinary problems and yet, the Lord was still able to use them. Sometimes we get the false impression that the characters in the Bible that were mightily used by God were somehow different than us, that they were specially endowed with spiritual knowledge and courage but that’s not the case. They were stubbornly self-centered like the rest of us. God was able to use them not because He could look past their character flaws and see what they would become but because they chose to move past their flaws and allow God to make them into whom He wanted them to become.

One of the reoccurring themes in this section is joy but the disciples were certainly not experiencing very much joy that night! So Jesus begins to deal with some of the difficulties felt by the disciples. This doesn’t mean that the full depth of His words were immediately understood or even that the disciples consciously felt that their problems had been solved. In some ways they were just as puzzled after Jesus spoke as they were before. But, important truths were spoken; answers were given. What Jesus said to

them that night eventually made a difference in their lives, just as it can certainly make a difference in our lives today. Jesus patiently and tenderly explains how His people can have joy in their lives.

16-20- The primary principle being presented in this passage is that, for believers, sorrow may endure for a short time but then it is transformed into a joy that cannot be taken away from us. Still, when we look at this section of our text, there's clearly some uncertainty as to what Jesus is actually talking about. First He speaks about a little while when the disciples will not see Him and then another little while when they will see Him. These words were certainly mysterious to men who stood on the other side of the cross so it's not surprising the disciples were puzzled. We stand on this side of the cross and find we are somewhat puzzled ourselves. Just like the disciples, I find myself asking the question, "What does He mean by "a little while?"

Why does Jesus use such enigmatic language? Was He trying to mess with their minds, trying to confuse them or purposefully trying to keep them in suspense? No, that's not how Jesus operates. You may have noticed in our study of John that often times the disciples would ask Jesus a direct question but His answer would be completely different to the point where it seemed like it had nothing to do with the question. But, in those instances, Jesus replies with what the disciples need to know rather than what they want to know. Likewise, here, His comments were given to mess with their minds; His ambiguity is intentional and purposeful.

It's not that Jesus is being purposely vague in His teaching. He makes things as clear as He possibly can for them. Actually, the ambiguity in His statement suggests that there is more than one meaning to it. Jesus is talking about a little while when He will not be seen, a time marked by sorrow, followed by another time in which He will be seen again, a time which will be joyful. This deliberate ambiguity suggests 3 different levels of interpretation. 1st, it can refer to Jesus' death and burial (when He was not seen) and His resurrection, when they saw Him again. 2nd, it can point to the times before and after Pentecost, because now, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we can see Jesus spiritually in a way that was not possible before. This idea is suggested by the context of the preceding verses (7-15). 3rd, it may describe the current church age, this short time in which we don't see Jesus with our physical eyes, but soon, after He returns in glory, we will see Him face-to-face and our sorrows will be transformed into eternal joy.

I want to briefly look at each of these interpretations and show how their importance applies to us even today.

1) The death and resurrection of Jesus is the first and most obvious interpretation mainly because Jesus is trying to comfort His disciples on the eve of His arrest and separation from them. They're going to experience great sorrow but He wants to assure them that soon, after His resurrection, they'll be joyful again. This was exactly the experience of the disciples. Jesus wasn't just their Rabbi, He was their friend. Their love for Him had grown in response to His love for them and His fellowship with them during His ministry. Then, although He tried to prepare them for it, Jesus was suddenly taken away and crucified. They were cast into a dark pit of despair and discouragement. There were several reasons for their sorrow.

They sorrowed because of their personal loss. They were closely attached to Jesus, and now He was gone forever, so they thought. Since they had left all to follow Him, He had become *their all* in place of what they had given up. They were left with a big hole in their lives, the kind of vacuum we feel when someone close to us dies. But, this was even more intense than that because this was the Lord of glory that was taken from them. They also sorrowed because of the world's attitude to His crucifixion (20). Their sorrow would be intensified because the world would actually rejoice that He was now out of their way and could no longer bother them. As the disciples sorrowed, the scribes and Pharisees were literally rubbing their hands in glee. That had to hurt!

But, they sorrowed mainly because of their disappointments. Every time we're given a glimpse of what they're thinking about during this time we see how disappointed they really were. Consider the Emmaus disciples. They're on their way home when Jesus appeared to them and asked why they were so downcast. They told Him how Jesus had just been crucified by the religious leaders. Then they delivered one of the most distressing lines in Scripture, "But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). They had put so much hope in Jesus and He had been taken away from them. Their hopes had all been crushed. Disappointment also explains Thomas' attitude in 20:25. It wasn't that Thomas was more disbelieving than the rest of the disciples. None of the others believed either until they had seen Jesus. But remember, it was Thomas who in ch11

volunteered them all to accompany Jesus back to Judea and die with Him if necessary. Thomas' comment in [20:25](#) was the result of a bitterness that was born of sharp disappointment.

For these reasons, the disciples experienced the worst sorrow of their lives. But then came the resurrection and their sorrow was transformed into joy! It wasn't that their sorrow was followed by joy or replaced with joy or that joy came but the sorrow still remained. No, the sorrow itself was transformed into joy because what had been the cause of their sorrow before was now the cause of their joy to the same degree. Before the resurrection the death of Christ appeared to be a total tragedy. But when Jesus rose from the dead they understood that the cross was not a tragedy but a triumph. Thus, in the NT, the cross is never mentioned in a tone of sorrow. The Gospel writers do accurately describe their feelings in those 3 days between the cross and the resurrection but after that, whenever they wrote about the cross they spoke of it not as a cause for sorrow but as a cause for joy. If there was only the crucifixion, we wouldn't properly understand it and it would still be a cause of sorrow for us today. But the resurrection of Jesus reveals the true plan of God and we can now rejoice in the victory of the cross just as these disciples did.

2) Jesus can also be referring to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit to the church. This view is suggested by the context. Jesus has just been speaking about the Holy Spirit and His ministry both to the world and to these disciples. Jesus concludes His lesson by saying that when the Holy Spirit comes, He's not going to speak of Himself but will speak of Jesus and make Him known. Immediately after this, Jesus mentions the little while when they won't see Him and then the little while after when they will see Him. Taken together, it's not hard to see a reference to the church age, where the Holy Spirit makes Jesus visible to believers (spiritually) as He reveals Him to us in Scripture.

Now, someone might say, "I've never seen Jesus, not even spiritually." The only way a person can see Jesus today with any kind of accuracy is by approaching Him through the pages of His Word. But, it's not enough to just come to the Scriptures in an academic way and study them. But, as we discover Jesus the way He is presented to us in the Scriptures, there must be that personal interaction with Him that brings us face-to-face with His holiness and causes us to turn from our sin so that we might begin to go His

way. Bible study itself won't save anyone. It'll definitely help get them there but it won't save, it can't. It's only as we respond to God's Word with repentance that we are saved.

Discovering Jesus is how you turn sorrow into joy today, But, it must be based both on a study of Scripture and on a deliberate turning from anything that hinders discipleship. It's turning from sin so we might press on to what's ahead.

This initial knowledge of Jesus is essential for salvation but that's not where we stop. Our discovery of Jesus must continue as we grow in our knowledge of His Word and in our experiences of faith. This is what Paul is telling us in **Phil 3**. He tells us what it meant for him to become a Christian (**5-8**). It meant coming to know Jesus. Then, he goes on to express his intense desire to know Jesus even better (**10, 13-14**). This should be every believer's life goal.

3) This also applies to the Second Coming. Even with the knowledge of Jesus provided by the Holy Spirit in this age there's still cause for a lot of sorrow, because we have our own disappointments, personal loss, and sin that keeps us from God. But this *isn't* permanent. Jesus is coming in just a little while. Then sorrow will be turned into joy. We often think His return is delayed (we're locked in time) but that's why a little while is so important. It reminds us that our current state is only temporary. It's short, and after it's over all our sorrows will be turned into joy.

There's a clear progression here. There's the revelation of Jesus at the time of the resurrection, this went beyond anything that the disciples had previously known. Then the revelation of Jesus to His people in this age. This is even better (**16:7**). Finally, there's the perfect revelation of Jesus when He returns in glory at the end of time. If this progression applies in a historical sense, it should also apply in our personal relationship with and knowledge of Jesus. We should know Him better this year over last and better next year than today. This can and will happen as, by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's guidance, we study the Bible and seek to enter into a full knowledge of Jesus.

21-22- Jesus provides an important spiritual principle in this text: God brings joy into our lives not by substitution but by transformation. The illustration of birth makes this clear. The same baby that causes the pain also causes the

joy. God doesn't substitute something else to relieve the mother's pain. He uses what's already there and transforms it!

What happens when parents constantly try to appease an unhappy child by substituting a new toy for a broken one or coming up with a new distraction to accommodate their boredom? There's nothing wrong with this if they're used sparingly but when parents are constantly busy trying to alleviate negative situations, the child grows up expecting people to come to their rescue whenever there's a crisis. The result is a spoiled child who's unable to cope with the realities of life. Using substitution to solve problems is the way of spiritual immaturity but transformation is the way of faith and maturity. We'll never mature emotionally or spiritually if someone's always replacing our broken toys.

Jesus didn't say the mother's sorrow was replaced by joy but that the sorrow was transformed into joy. It's the same way in the Christian's life. God takes seemingly impossible situations, adds the miracle of His grace and the power of His Holy Spirit and transforms trial into triumph and sorrow into joy. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Potiphar, the guy that bought him, had him thrown into prison for a crime he didn't commit. This wasn't just a bad day, this was terrible! And yet, God took that hopeless situation of defeat and transformed it into a tremendous victory and cause for joy, not just for Joseph but for his brothers and I'm sure for Potiphar too.

Egyptian persecution of the Hebrews only caused them to multiply and prosper all the more. King Saul's murderous pursuit of David only made him more of a man of God and helped produce many of the Psalms that encourage our hearts today. Even Jesus took up that cross, which was a symbol of defeat and shame and transformed it into a symbol of victory, salvation and glory. He can do the same thing in each one of our lives as well. You may be going through a situation in your life right now that seems to be just as much unacceptable as it is unchangeable. You're probably correct, humanly speaking. But God is not bound by our difficulties, though often times He is bound by our stubborn self-confidence and refusal to look to Him for help.

Your current difficult situation may have you discouraged, confused and afraid, just like the disciples were. We can understand their confusion over Jesus' soon departure. They have come to realize that Jesus was Israel's

long awaited Messiah. If that was true, and He had come to establish His Messianic kingdom, why would He go away? If, on the other hand, He wasn't going to establish His kingdom, why would He return? Do you see their dilemma? Of course, instead of asking Jesus to explain His statement, they merely discuss their confusion amongst themselves as though they were embarrassed to admit their ignorance. But, you don't get very far by exchanging ignorance! Here's a hint: Jesus already knows we are thick in the head. It's only when we come to Him and ask for His help that we learn the important lessons of life.

"Jesus said 'a little while' but it's been over 2000 years!" True, but time is relative. 2000 yrs seems like a long time to us because we've only lived a small fraction of it (some more than others). To a mother in labor, every minute may seem like an hour. Our concept of time changes with our feelings. 30 minutes for a root canal may seem like an eternity while an all day fishing excursion is over before you know it. The mother may feel like the birth is taking a long time when it really might only be "a little while." When the baby is born, the pain is forgotten as joy fills her heart.

While the immediate application may be to the sorrowing hearts of the disciples, the ultimate application is to all of God's people as they wait the coming of Jesus Christ. The world today doesn't want Jesus or His church. They are rejoicing while we are suffering, longing for His return. To us it seems like a long time but god doesn't measure time as we do. But, while we are waiting, we must deal with all of our trials and hurts on the basis of transformation and not substitution, if we expect to ever mature in this Christian life. If you are going through a difficult situation and if God is in complete control of your life then that difficult situation has a specific place and purpose in your life. To find out what it is you must seek the Lord's face in prayer and come to know the Lord's mind by discovering it as you diligently study His Word.

For every problem or situation, Jesus is the answer. 😊