

## PEACE IN A TROUBLED WORLD 7

# Grief & Joy – John 16:16-33

## Context

Christ has been preparing the embryonic Church, represented by these 11 faithful disciples who will become the foundation of the Church, for life in the Church Age without Him physically present. The sequence of events on this evening has been:

### 1. Jesus washes the disciples' feet

This may have been before or after the Passover meal and the Lord's Supper.

### 2. The Passover followed by the institution of the Lord's Supper

John does not mention the Lord's Supper and it is not clear from his record where the Passover celebration fits into the order.

### 3. The last recorded teaching of Christ before His death

From 13:31 onwards Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for the fact that He will soon be leaving them but. He explains that in the Church Age:

- a. Their community will be marked by love and servant leadership (13:15-17, 14:31-38) – but how can they know the truth without Jesus present?
- b. They will live by faith, not by sight (14:1-14) – how then can they know God's help?
- c. The indwelling Holy Spirit will be their Counsellor (14:15-31) – what is their purpose in being left here?
- d. They will bear fruit for God because of their connection to Christ (15:1-17) – how will the world react?
- e. The world will hate them (15:18-16:4) – how then will anyone be saved?
- f. The Spirit will lead them into all truth (16:5-16) – will they then have perfect peace?

It is worth noting that there is movement within this discourse. This teaching of Jesus, punctuated by questions from the disciples, has often been called the "Upper Room Discourse", since Jesus' teaching began in the Upper Room where they celebrated the Passover. However, in 14:31 Jesus said "Come now; let us leave". This suggests that at that point the group left the Upper Room and began their journey through the city towards the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus would be arrested. It is possible that the words of Chapters 15 and 16 and the prayer of Chapter 17 took place in the Temple compound (this would place the comments about the Vine and the High Priestly prayer of Christ in an appropriate setting). It is not until 18:1 that they exited the city and crossed the Kidron Valley towards Gethsemane (simply called by John "an olive grove").

The disciples still remain confused by Jesus' teaching. They have not grasped that he must die, and when in 16:16 He says again that He will leave them in a little while and then after another little while they will see Him, they begin to discuss among themselves what He means. Christ knows their thoughts (we don't know why the disciples didn't ask Him directly – perhaps they felt they had asked enough questions, or perhaps they thought He was tired), and He responds with this last section of this discourse.

## Key Lessons

There are five key lessons in this section of Jesus' teaching, which we will examine in turn below:

1. The Christian Life is one of great joy but also grief (Christian life is not protected from suffering)
2. God deals with our grief through transformation, not substitution
3. Prayer is essential to joy in the present age
4. Our future hope transforms our present lives
5. Christ has overcome the world – we too should overcome it

## Immediate & Long-term application

One important question as approach this passage is what period of time Jesus was speaking about when He said "in a little while" in verse 16. Was He speaking about His death and His return at the resurrection or His ascension and His return either at the end of the age or in the person of the Holy Spirit? I believe that the most likely immediate application is to his death and resurrection. This is based on the following:

- **Jesus will soon die** ("in a little while" v16) – the world will rejoice but they will be:

- a) Sorrowful (v20)
- b) Scattered (v32) – cf. Zechariah 13:7

If the reference was to the ascension then Jesus could hardly speak of the intense grief and the scattering of the disciples. This happened after His death, whereas after His ascension the group stayed together and prayed, awaiting the coming of the Spirit (see Acts 1:12-14).

- **Jesus will come back to them in a little while** (after resurrection) and their grief will change to joy (v20). This surely speaks of the joy of the resurrection. If the first “little while” of verse 16 referred to a period of a few hours until His death then it seems likely that the second “little while” is also a short period measured in hours (less than three days before His resurrection).

However, I believe the truths of this passage can also be applied to the Church Age in which we live as we await Christ's return. The phrase “a little while” is used in Hebrews 10:37 to describe the present wait until the return of Christ, and although it has been nearly 2000 years, this is not a long time in God's reckoning (see II Peter 3). The teaching of Christ here about the grief and joy of the disciples is surely relevant to us as we live in a world of grief awaiting the greatest joy the universe will ever know, when the Kingdom of God is revealed in its fullness.

## **The disciples' response to Jesus**

Before we examine Jesus' teaching under the headings listed above, I want to pause just for a minute to think of the disciples in this passage in their journey of faith. They are muttering among themselves about what Jesus means (vv17&18). Then when Jesus responds to their unspoken question they are amazed. They see that He does not even need them to ask Him questions, and this convinces them that He really did come from God (v30). Jesus' response is striking in verse 31. The NIV puts it, “You believe at last!” but there is surely an irony in this statement. The reality is that although they think they have finally grasped the point of His teaching they have not. The NIV footnotes may be closer: “Do you now believe?”. Alternatively this phrase could be rendered: “Now you believe ... but”. Whichever it is, the most amazing thing in this passage is not the weak faith of the disciples but the tender patience of the Lord. He says these things so that they may have peace in Him. He is absolutely patient with them, focusing on their need rather than His impending pain. These words will bring some comfort to them in the period before the resurrection, and they will make sense fully after He returns to His Father and the Spirit comes.

## **The Joy Christ brings**

### **1. Joy does not exclude suffering (grief, loneliness and trouble)**

Three kinds of suffering are mentioned in this passage:

#### **a) Grief (v20)**

Grief is defined by dictionaries as: Deep mental anguish, as that arising from bereavement. The disciples will be bereaved within hours of this moment (within 24 hours Christ will be dead and buried). We too face grief in this present age – the loss of a loved one, a hoped-for thing that fails to materialise, a relationship that disappoints. Grief is part of the fabric of life in a fallen world, and Christians are not insulated from it, but God does promise us His peace and joy in the face of grief.

#### **b) Loneliness (v32)**

to do the will of God may mean loneliness. In this passage we see the loneliness of Christ – they will desert Him but God will not (v32)! His loneliness came from obedience to the Father. Those who want to do God's will at times experience a similar loneliness. Like Elijah, sometimes this will come from exhaustion and the feeling that no one else is seeking God's will. At these times when we cry out to the Lord He will restore our vision (see I Kings 19:10-18). At other times it will be the loneliness of being the only Christian in your work-place or class, the only one who takes a stand on a moral issue. Perhaps at times it may even be true that other Christians are compromising on God's will or that God's calling on your life is unique and difficult for other Christians to understand. Many servants of God have experienced that loneliness. In Geneva, Switzerland, there is a statue to the great leaders of the Reformation. One of the images on the statue is that of John Knox, who brought the gospel in a fresh way to Scotland. The words under Knox's image say: “Un home avec Dieu est toujours dans la majorité”, which translates: one man with God is always in the majority. The reality is that when we do God's will we are never alone – God is with us, just as He was with His Son. We are never in a minority when God is on our side! Have you felt that loneliness? Seek God's joy in your prayer to Him.

### **c) Trouble (v33)**

The third type of suffering in the passage comes from opposition from the world. We should not expect that our lives will be free from trouble. In fact, Christ promises us that we will have trouble in this world (v33) – this is for certain (He doesn't say "you may have trouble"). Being a Christian does not shield us from all suffering – in fact it may lead us into greater suffering because we will face the opposition of the world that Christ spoke of in 15:18-16:4).

There are those who teach that the Christian life should be free of all suffering if we have faith. This is simply not borne out by Scripture. I quote from the doctrinal statement of one very well known Christian author and speaker:

Healing is for the physical ills of the human body and is wrought by the power of God through the prayer of faith and by the laying on of hands. It is provided for in the atonement of Christ, and it is the privilege of every member of the church today.

This position brings the physical healing that will be ours in the perfected Kingdom after Christ returns forward into the present Church Age. To do so completely neglects the teaching of Christ and the apostles and contradicts both our experience and the record of the lives of the apostles.

## **2. Joy can never be taken away from us**

The reality is that in this life we will face grief, loneliness and trouble, but God promises that His grace will be sufficient for us, and Christ holds out the promise of a joy that rises above all of these circumstances. People have pursued joy in many different things, but, as the following quotations demonstrate, joy cannot be found in this world:

- Not in Unbelief – 18<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher Voltaire rejected God absolutely. He wrote: "I wish I had never been born."
- Not in Pleasure – early 19<sup>th</sup> Century English poet Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote: "The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone."
- Not in Money – 19<sup>th</sup> Century American millionaire Jay Gould had plenty of that. When dying, he said: "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth."
- Not in Position and Fame – 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Beaconsfield, enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote: "Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."
- Not in Military Glory – ancient King of Macedon Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent, before he said, "There are no more worlds to conquer."

True joy is the joy of Jesus, which:

- Was won for us by Christ's victory at the cross (v20)
- Comes from a relationship with the living Christ (v22)
- Is based on the fact that He has overcome the world (v33)

This joy can never be taken away. Dictionaries define joy as an intense and especially ecstatic or exultant happiness. There is truth in this definition, but the definition of Christian joy is greater than this definition because it is lasting and rises above the circumstances of our lives because our relationship with Christ can never be disrupted by any circumstance. Joy should be defined as: "the satisfaction that comes from a living relationship with Christ". Not only this, but we have a real hope of the resurrection of those we love who have died. I Thessalonians 4:13 – we do not sorrow like those who have no hope. We know that a day is coming when all of our sorrow and grief will be transformed into joy. Only then will the old order of things pass away so that there can be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Our joy cannot be taken away because our relationship with Christ cannot be lost. Whatever else happens in our lives, we have this great hope that He is with us and that He will return to take us to be with Him, and that makes all the difference.

## **3. Joy comes through transformation, not substitution**

The image Christ uses is of a woman giving birth. She must endure great suffering, but the joy of the birth of a child outweighs all of the suffering. Warren Wiersbe points out the difference between substitution (for example a parent replacing a broken toy with a new one) and transformation (a parent making a broken toy into a new situation and learning opportunity) as illustrated by this image of childbirth. He says of verse 21, "The same baby that caused the pain also caused the joy. And so it is with the Christian life: God takes seemingly impossible situations, adds the miracle of His grace, and transforms trial into triumph and sorrow into joy".

Interestingly, this picture of childbirth is used in the Old Testament in Picture of childbirth – Isaiah 26:16-21. There it speaks of Israel's failure to give birth to a people of faith in God ("We have not

brought salvation to the earth” – they have failed in their God-given mission of bringing salvation to the nations) and the prophetic hope of resurrection (“the earth will give birth to her dead”). Christ, in contrast, will succeed in that mission through His suffering – the joy He will bring will be the redemption of those who trust in Him (see Isaiah 53:10&11). His resurrection will bring the joy of seeing a people who are truly redeemed and will share in His resurrection.

Barclay points out that the picture of childbirth had a Messianic significance for the Jews:

“The Jews believed that all time was divided into two ages – the present age, and the age to come. The present age was wholly bad, and wholly under condemnation; the age to come was the golden age of God. In between the two ages, preceding the coming of the Messiah, who would bring in the new age, there lay the Day of the Lord; and the Day of the Lord was to be a terrible day, when the world would be shattered and disintegrated into fragments, when all things would be convulsed, and then after that the golden age would dawn. The Jews were in the habit of calling that terrible between-time ‘the birth travail of the days of the Messiah’. They actually used this picture of the pain of birth which precedes the entry of new life into the world. The Old Testament and the literature which was written between the Testaments are both full of pictures of this terrible between-time” (he quotes Isaiah 13:9 and Joel 2:1&2 as OT examples).

The example of Christ’s suffering and resurrection proves a principle to us: that **God will replace suffering not through substitution but through transformation**. Of course we know deep down that this is necessary. Who, having lost a loved one, would ever think that they could be replaced or substituted for? That would be impossible. But with God the situation can be transformed so that good can come from it. God is not just able to replace our pain with happiness, He is able to produce something good out of it. He leads us through each painful experience to deeper trust in Him. This has been my experience in my own illness – through it God has been teaching me to trust in Him and to depend on Him. It is a great way to learn humility.

I know that this can seem trite to people sometimes, and I hope you don’t think it sounds overly simplistic. There are many other examples of this in the lives of Christian people:

- Joni Eareckson Tada – in 1967, aged 17, she was paralysed from the neck down in a diving accident: “My wheelchair used to symbolize alienation and confinement. But God has changed its meaning because I have trusted in Him. Now my wheelchair symbolizes independence. It is a choice I made and one that anyone can make. **I have discovered many good things that have come from my disability**. I used to think happiness was a Friday night date, a size 12 dress, and a future with Ethan Allen furniture and 2.5 children. Now I know better. What matters is love.” Now Joni works tirelessly to help disabled people know the love of God.
- Josephine Butler (see her story at the end of this document)

It is only the power of God that can transform a tragedy into something that is not completely pointless. Without Him our grief, loneliness and trouble is pointless, only bad with no hope, but with Him there is a meaning that stretches beyond and incorporates even the worst of life’s pain. If you want to read further in Scripture on this theme have a look at Romans 5:1-5 and Romans 8:28.

#### 4. Joy is made complete by prayerful dependence on God (v24)

Jesus returns to the idea of prayer in this passage – it is one of the key themes in the Upper Room Discourse (Chapters 13-16). Jesus has already taught them that:

- He will do anything that they ask in His name to bring glory to the Father (14:13&14)
- The Father will give them whatever they ask in Jesus’ name if they are bearing fruit as He has called them to do (15:16)

Now He tells them that the Father will give whatever they ask in His name so that their joy may be complete (vv23&24): “ask and you will receive”. So, then, Jesus connects prayer with:

- a) Glorifying God (Ch 14)
- b) Bearing fruit (Ch15)
- c) Our joy (Ch16)

Prayer is a two-way communication and is vital both for God’s will to be done in our lives and for our joy to be complete. We are designed to live in constant relationship with God, and this relationship is two way.

Often we seem to allow circumstances to rob us of our joy. Nothing should ever do this – if we focus on our relationship with Christ our joy will be complete. Philippians 4:4-7 – Paul promises peace and joy if we present our requests to God with thanksgiving. Banbridge, Co. Down, man Joseph Scriven captured this truth in his famous hymn:

O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer.

It may be helpful to realise that there are two different Greek translated “ask” in this passage:

- a) “to ask a question” [*erotao*] (19, 23a, 26)
- b) “to request something of a superior” (23b, 24, 26b)

The disciples have been asking questions of Jesus in the first sense of the word, but after the Spirit has come they will no longer do this. Now we ask of the Father in the second sense and the Spirit leads us into truth (as we saw in 16:5-16). In Heaven we will not need to ask anything because we will know even as we are known (I Corinthians 13:12).

## 5. Our joy is assured because Christ has overcome the world

Our joy is possible because of Christ’s peace that He shares with us. The peace of Christ had to be won through a victory! That victory was the cross of Christ. Christ has overcome the world – we too are overcomers through faith in Him. The phrase “overcomer” is common in John’s later writings:

- I John 2:14 – the Christians have overcome evil one because the word of God lives in them
- I John 4:4 – He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world (the Holy Spirit is greater than the devil) and therefore we have overcome the evil spirits who influence the world. We are able to discern the Holy Spirit’s voice clearly.
- I John 5:4&5 – those who overcome are those who are born of God through faith in Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God.
- Eight times in Revelation promises of blessing and Heaven are made to those who overcome (2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21, 21:7). In fact, in the letters to the seven churches this is the dominant description of faithful Christians.
- Revelation 17:14 – the Lamb overcomes the beast because He is the Lord of lords and King of kings. His “called, chosen and faithful followers” will overcome with Him.

It is tragic that Christians who share in Christ’s victory over the world so often succumb to its influence. We don’t test the spirits, but absorb the world’s influence. We justify things to ourselves that are at best a waste of our time and energy and at worst are harming us deeply. If we have overcome the world, how come we are indistinguishable from it? Can you have victory as you struggle for purity and holiness? Yes, because Christ has overcome! Can we stand firm in witness to God’s greatness and goodness? Yes, because Christ has overcome! We often think that our biggest problem is that our desires are too strong – leading us astray. However, C.S. Lewis saw it differently:

“Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

This is the basis for our peace as Christians. It isn’t a false sense of security or even a hope that one day Christ will defeat our enemies finally (although He will) – it is the confidence that the decisive battle has been won and the tide has turned. There is an inevitability about the final outcome because it was decided at the cross! Overcome the world, rather than being overcome by it, indistinguishable from it or overwhelmed by it. Too often we spend our lives subject to our circumstances rather than rejoicing in them and glorifying God through them.

## Conclusion

According to Christ’s teaching in these chapters in the current age Christians should:

1. **Love one another as Christ loved us** – Christian discipleship, fellowship and leadership are based on this principle
2. **Live by faith, not by sight** – we know God personally through Christ. He reveals God to us as He is the way to the Father, the ultimate truth and the source of life.
3. **Know the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit as our Counsellor** – He indwells us and is our constant help to do God’s will.
4. **Bear fruit for God because of our connection to Christ** – our witness to the world depends on this intimate relationship with Him and transformation of our character through communion with Him.
5. **Face opposition from the world** – the world will hate us because we belong to Christ. Spiritual warfare is a reality for us.
6. **Know the Spirit’s guidance into all truth and see His convicting power** – it is the Spirit who gives us victory in the battle, and conversion is His work.
7. **Know grief but above all joy** – we can know the real joy of Christ despite grief, loneliness and trouble.

So, then, what is robbing you of your joy? As we live this Christian life we should have real joy that cannot be robbed. This is the life in all its fullness that Christ came to give us.

Cyprian of Carthage, who lived in the third-century aged 45 wrote to a friend:

"Donatus,"—he said, in effect,—“this is a cheerful world indeed as I see it from my fair garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain, and look out over the wide lands, you know very well that I should see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the seas, armies fighting, cities burning, in the amphitheatres men murdered to please applauding crowds, selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a company of quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which [7] is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not: they are masters of their soils. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians,—and I am one of them.”

Cyprian became bishop of Carthage around 2 years later. Another 11 years after that he faced trial for refusing to make a sacrifice to the Emperor Valerian. He was executed in AD 258, a faithful witness to Christ.

When people look at our Church would they call us “a company of quiet and holy people who ... have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life”? Is it evident to them that we have overcome the world? Lord, save us from mediocrity. Let us know your joy and peace. Let us shine for You!

## Josephine Butler

Josephine Butler, the daughter of John Grey and Hannah Annett, was born in 1828. Grey was a wealthy landowner and the cousin of Earl Grey, the British Prime Minister who led the Whig administration between 1830 and 1834. Her father was a strong advocate of social reform and played a significant role in the campaign for the 1832 Reform Act and the repeal of the Corn Laws. Josephine grew up to share her father's religious and moral principles and his strong dislike of inequality and injustice. It was not until her late teens that Butler experienced a 'religious crisis and conversion that left her with a mystical sense of calling.'

Josephine was an attractive woman and Prince Leopold claimed that she was "considered by many people to be the most beautiful woman in the world."

In 1852 Josephine married George Butler, an examiner of schools in Oxford. In the first five years of marriage Josephine had four children. In 1857 the couple moved from Oxford after George Butler was appointed vice-principal of Cheltenham College. George and Josephine had similar political views and during the American Civil War they encountered a great deal of hostility in Cheltenham when they expressed their support for the anti-slavery movement.

In 1863, Eva, Josephine's only daughter, fell to her death in front of her (fell down the stairs after running out of an upstairs room to greet her mother returning home). Josephine was devastated by the death of her six year-old daughter and was never to fully recover from this family tragedy. In an attempt to cope with her grief, Josephine Butler became involved in charity work. This involved Josephine visiting the local workhouse and rescuing young prostitutes from the streets. Butler described that she 'became possessed with an irresistible urge to go forth and find some pain keener than my own, to meet with people more unhappy than myself.'

Josephine also began to take a keen interest in women's education. In 1867 she joined Anne Jemima Clough in establishing courses of advanced study for women. Later that year Josephine Butler was appointed president of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women. The following year Josephine became involved in the campaign to persuade Cambridge University to provide more opportunities for women students. This campaign resulted in the provision of lectures for women and later the establishment of Newnham College.

In 1868 Josephine Butler published her book *The Education and Employment of Women*. In her pamphlet, she argued for improved educational and employment opportunities for single women. The following year she wrote *Women's Work and Women's Culture*, in which she argued that women should not "try to rival men since they had a different part to play in society". These views upset some feminists such as Emily Davies who wanted women to compete on the same terms as men. Butler believed that women should have the vote because they were different from men. She argued that women's special role was to protect and care for the weak and that women's suffrage was of vital importance to the morality and welfare of the nation.

In 1869 Josephine Butler began her campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act. These acts had been introduced in the 1860s in an attempt to reduce venereal disease in the armed forces. Butler objected in principal to laws that only applied to women. Under the terms of these acts, the police could arrest women they believed were prostitutes and could then insist that they had a medical examination. Butler had considerable sympathy for the plight of prostitutes who she believed had been forced into this work by low earnings and unemployment.

Josephine Butler toured the country making speeches criticizing the Contagious Diseases Acts. Butler, who was an outstanding orator, attracted large audiences to hear her explain why these laws needed to be repealed. Many people were shocked by the idea of a woman speaking in public about sexual matters. George Butler, who was now the principal of Liverpool College, was severely criticised for allowing his wife to become involved in this campaign. Butler continued to support his wife in her work despite the warnings that it would damage his academic career.

Butler also became involved in the campaign against child prostitution. In 1885 Butler joined together with Florence Booth of the Salvation Army and W. T. Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to expose what had become known as the white slave traffic. The group used the case of Eliza Armstrong, a thirteen year-old daughter of a chimney-sweep, who was bought for £5 by a woman working for a London brothel. As a result of the publicity that the Armstrong case generated, Parliament passed the Criminal Law Amendment Act that raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen.

After the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1886, Josephine spent her time nursing her sick husband. After his death in 1890, Josephine wrote *Recollections of George Butler* (1892) and *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (1896). In her last few years of her life, Josephine became a supporter of the National Union of Suffrage Societies. However, now in her seventies, Josephine was too old to take a prominent role in the movement's activities. Josephine Butler died in 1906.

