

“No One Will Take Your Joy,” John 16:16-24 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2018)

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.”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.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.

PRAY

Today we are beginning our springtime study of the gospel of John. We started this study back in January 2012 (January 8, 2012, to be exact). We’ve studied the gospel each spring since, except for the spring of 2014. This is our sixth spring and seventieth sermon so far on this gospel. Lord willing we have seven more sermons on John after today and will finish March 25. Some of you are probably ready to finish John and move on to another book but I can assure no one is more ready than I am. Not that this study hasn’t been fruitful in my own life. It has, and I’m glad we’ve done it. We believe in teaching the Bible verse-by-verse, and our commitment at Grace Bible is to teaching all the Bible – not just the popular or well-known passages, but all of it. So I’m glad we’ve taken the time to cover the whole gospel of John because we trust that all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

The Bible teaches over and over again that the gospel of Jesus Christ should produce joy in those who believe it. Christians are to be known for their joy, and over and over again in the Scriptures we are commanded to have it. To take just one example, Philippians 4:4, the apostle Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” “Rejoice” in that verse is an imperative, a command.

I admit that when I first considered this concept years ago I found it a little strange. I grew up in a very Christian environment, yet the thought of joy marking my life hadn’t occurred to me. Christians were supposed to be good, be moral, be self-controlled, sacrificial. Not that it would be wrong to be joyful, but I wouldn’t have said it marked a lot of the Christians I knew and I certainly didn’t think it was required. And my guess is that if you did not grow up in a Christian environment, you don’t really think “joy” when you think of Christians either. You might think judgmental or maybe Christians are naïve do-gooders but not “joyful.”

Yet that is our call, and we learn much about the joy Christians should have from these nine verses. I want to point out three things about Christian joy from this text: first, the source of Christian joy. Second, what is Christian joy? Third, how to bring it into your life.

First, the source of Christian joy. In verses 16-19, Jesus talks about two “little whiles.” He says to his disciples that in a little while, you will see me no longer, and you will weep. But then, after a second little while, you will see me again and your sorrow will turn into joy.

What are these two “little whiles”? There’s been a lot of debate on this question over the history of the church, but now there’s a consensus that the first “little while” refers to Jesus’ death on the cross. He will die, and his disciples will weep. But a few days later, a second “little while,” and their weeping will be turned to joy as Jesus is resurrected, raised from the dead. His new body is indestructible. It can’t get sick, it can’t get cancer, it can’t starve, it can’t grow weary, it can never die.

The disciples in John 16 will see Jesus crucified, dead, and buried, but then they’ll see him resurrected. They love Jesus and did not want to lose him, but when they get him back they are overjoyed.

Now, understandably, you may be out there saying, “Well, J.D., of course the disciples felt joy when they got Jesus back because they got to see him! They saw his glorified, resurrected body. They got to touch him, they got to hug him and hear him, he taught them for forty days after he died. I’d have joy, too, if I experienced that.”

Let’s be clear: the disciples were not full of joy *only* because Jesus was resurrected. That was cool, that was an awesome thing to behold, but that was not why they were overjoyed. They were overjoyed because of *what Jesus’ resurrection meant for them.* And what his resurrection meant for the disciples, it means for us.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul gives us the longest treatment on the resurrection you’ll find anywhere in the Bible. His main point is that because Jesus was raised from the dead and given a new, glorified body, we will one day be resurrected, too. At some certain point in the future, at the end of this age, Jesus will return for all his people and he will raise us up.

In 1 Peter 1:3-5, Peter writes this: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

What’s Peter saying? He’s affirming what Paul says – because Jesus was resurrected, we will be, too. But he also adds this: through faith in Christ, we get an inheritance. I am sure there are a few people in this room who stand to one day receive a significant inheritance of property and money, the kind of money that can really change someone’s life. And that’s great – that’s a blessing when it happens to you.

What the Bible says, though, is that one day all of us who trust in Jesus will receive an inheritance whereby we all not only get resurrected, glorified bodies but *we'll get resurrected, glorified lives*. Lives in the new heaven and new earth that are impervious to sin, sorrow, sickness, pain, and death. No one can take these things from us.

Second, what exactly is the Christian joy? The resurrection is the source of our joy, but that doesn't tell us the shape the joy takes when it's present in our lives. What does it look like? In the early years of our marriage my wife and I lived in Jackson. While there I met a certain Christian, and he was very big on this point of how God's people should rejoice in all circumstances. One of the last times I saw him he told me how he told me his sister, who had the same views on joy as he did, had just gone into the hospital to have a baby. She was at full-term, but the baby was stillborn. There was no warning, they thought they had a healthy baby going into the hospital, so it was a shock.

But this guy was very proud of his sister, because even though she'd just lost her baby, she was determined to obey what the Bible says about Christian joy so she smiled the whole time. He said that she did shed some tears, but she didn't let her baby dying take away her joy. He said she even sang upbeat praise songs while they took the child's lifeless body from her.

I don't relate this story to criticize someone for how they handle their suffering. That would be cruel. I only mention this story because I got the distinct impression from this guy that his sister was forcing herself to seem happy even when she clearly wasn't, and some Christians think that's what Christian joy means. In fact, in some broad portions of Christianity, if you so much as hint that you might be feeling down about something, or make any kind of negative comment about your circumstances, you will be chastised. You may have heard people say, "Don't speak that over yourself." You go on long enough feeling down in those circles and they'll take your head off – they'll accuse you of having no faith in Jesus at all.

That is not what the Bible means when it speaks of Christian joy. Christian joy does not require that you must act like nothing's ever wrong in your life. We are called, in Romans 12:15, to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." We are told, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Matthew 5:4. Whole books of the Bible, like Job, are devoted to suffering. Job just about lost his mind in the midst of his suffering – he wasn't singing upbeat praise songs when he lost his wealth, his health, and his children, yet in the book of James we read that he is a model of Christian faith.

So what is Christian joy? It's not some phony happiness we have to pretend we have. ***It's ballast for your life.*** You know what ballast is? It's weight you put in the bottom of ships to make them steady on the sea. If a ship has too much weight above the water line, it is very unstable. But if you put the right amount of sand or water in a special ballast tank, right against the hull at the bottom of the boat, it will keep upright as it sails no matter the cargo and no matter how the storms might blow.

Christian joy serves as ballast in your life. When troubles come (and they will – "in this world you will have trouble"), you won't sink. You can have peace and a deep, abiding joy even in the

harshest trials because the resurrection means the pain you're going through right now will not have the final word.

Friends, think with me for a second: if you owe the credit card company fifty thousand dollars, and it's past due – the bill collectors are calling all the time – but you know that in six months a trust fund of which you are a beneficiary will mature, and you'll get fifty million dollars, are you worried? No – so with that knowledge, when the bill collectors call, you smile. You laugh when they threaten you with litigation. Send the lawyers, you say. When they talk ugly to you, you tell them a joke. You don't care, because no matter what they do over the next six months something will happen that's going to take care of everything. None of it will matter then. Your debts can't have the final word.

Reason with me from the lesser to the greater. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we know right now beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter how bad things are now, one day something will happen that's going to make everything alright. It's going to make everything more than alright: it will make everything perfect, such that never again will we experience pain, or fear, or worry. In Revelation 21 we are told that God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. All will be well.

We don't precisely how it will happen, nor do we know when it will happen – it could be ten years from now, it could be a hundred years after we die – but one day we will stand in glory with Jesus and all the other believers, and sin will be gone and pain will be gone and disappointment will be gone. Therefore, no matter what is happening going on with your health, money, marriage, or kids right now, even when you have no idea what God is up to now, you can't help it: because the resurrection will happen, you have joy now even amidst the worst pain. You know the pain and suffering now can't destroy you. You will stand.

Critics of Christianity have mocked this kind of teaching. They've said that Christian ministers like me actually help to keep the world an evil place because we teach people just to be content with their lot in life and don't worry themselves with all the injustices in the world. After all, in heaven everything will be better. Joe Hill, an early twentieth century social activist, made fun of this teaching in his song "The Preacher and the Slave." He said that preachers like me with our notions of resurrection were telling hungry, poor people not to worry, because: "You will eat, bye and bye, in that glorious land above the sky; work and pray, live on hay, 'cause you'll get pie in the sky when you die."

Is that all there is to Christian joy? "Pie in the sky"? No. Because it serves as ballast now it produces courage to point out injustices on earth and fight against them. Christians historically have and continue to take aim at poverty, the mistreatment of women, and racism. They've refused to say of the evil things in the world "that's just the way things are" and, instead, sacrificed and put themselves at risk to put an end to them. Where did they get the courage? Because Christians know we have an inheritance kept in heaven that cannot perish, spoil, or fade.

The ballast of Christian joy also produces kindness and patience in us now, because we trust that God will deal bountifully with us so we can afford to be generous with others. Most of all this ballast produces love in us now, because we've been loved so deeply and powerfully by God our

Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not "pie in the sky," it's a joy that works and fights and changes things right now. I love how the old NIV translates 1 Corinthians 15:58. Paul finishes his great treatment on the resurrection and writes this: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. *Let nothing move you* [I love that sentence]. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know [because of the resurrection] that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Third, how do we get this joy? Three things I want to show us: *first, we get this joy only through Jesus.* 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."

It's easy to read verse 21 as if Jesus is talking about the disciples – they were hurting, because Jesus was dead, but then when they saw him after the resurrection their anguish was overwhelmed by seeing Jesus alive. Now, that is what happened to the disciples, but this verse is not about their pain. They are not represented by the woman giving birth.

The key to understanding this verse correctly is found in the phrase "her hour has come." The "hour" in the gospel of John always refers to Jesus, and it always refers to his crucifixion. Jesus is the one giving birth, except the labor he went through took place on the cross and not in a hospital. On the cross, Jesus went through the pains of delivery and on the other side he produced our salvation.

So it's only through Jesus that we can get this joy, because he is the only one who could have ever delivered it up for you. If anyone ever comes up to you and says: "You Christians – you are so narrow-minded and dogmatic, because you say that Jesus is the only way to be saved," you say, "Yep, you're right, guilty as charged, because only Jesus could give birth to kind of the salvation a sinner like me desperately needs."

My wife and I have children, and so I've been in a labor and delivery room several times over the years. I've seen her labor pains, and I've seen her ready for the delivery to be over. But when finally the baby comes, yet it's not that her pain immediately goes away. The pain is still there but it is overwhelmed by the joy of a human being having been born into the world.

But what is so wonderful about verse 21 is that he says Jesus "no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world." When we trust in Christ's death on the cross we are born again. And Jesus is so overjoyed that we have gone from death to life that he can't even remember the pain of the cross.

Second, we get this joy only through faith. I didn't understand verses like verse 20 for a long time. There Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament [because of my death], but the world will rejoice." How, I would wonder, could anyone rejoice at the death of Jesus? He's so loving! He's so kind! He healed people! How could the world hate him?

I don't wonder anymore. When people who are lost in sin get to know the real Jesus, and not the Jesus of popular imagining who only carried around little sheep and blessed the children and

loved the poor, they hate him. They hate him because Jesus makes it clear that no one can be righteous on their own.

Everyone wants to believe they are self-righteous. Conservative religious people want to believe their church attendance, their well-behaved children, their refusal to drink or smoke, their patriotism and hard work means they are good people and, therefore, self-righteous. They would of course give assent to the proposition that they need to be saved from their sins. “Sure, I’m a sinner.” But deep down they don’t really think they need a savior, and it’s proven by how quickly and severely they judge people who don’t live according to their standards.

Liberal secular people hate that about religious people. They rightly do not like how judgmental church people can be. But then they also start to believe they are self-righteous because they aren’t like those hypocritical Christians, and because they do vote to raise taxes to help the poor, they support progressive causes, and because today they are constantly told by the media they are on the right side of history.

Everyone deep down thinks they are self-righteous, but the reality is that God is so pure, so holy, so glorious, that according to Isaiah 64 even our best deeds and our most righteous attitudes are nothing but filthy rags in God’s sight. We are sinners, we have offended a holy God, and we cannot stand on our own in his presence. We can’t get this joy on our own. We can only get it ***by faith in Jesus***, someone who is really is righteous.

We get this joy *only through Jesus, by faith, and third through prayer*. In the last part of verse 22 Jesus says, “[N]o one will take your joy from you.” And that’s true – if your joy is secured by faith in Jesus, no one will. *But if you are not diligent you can let your own joy go.*

The New Testament is full of warnings about how Christians have to be diligent if they are going to persevere in the faith. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27, “I discipline my body and keep it under control ...” The old NIV puts it “I beat my body and make it my slave ...” Diligence is required.

Why? Because the world, the flesh, and the devil are all conspiring to distract you, to confuse you, to afflict you and wear you down, because while they can’t take your joy they can work on you until you voluntarily let it go. So that’s why Jesus says in verses 23-24, “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. ²⁴Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” People always want to know how this works – ask for anything in Jesus’ name and I’ll get it? Ask for a new house? A new car?

But the context of this passage is not physical needs or desires, is it? Jesus is not promising those things. The context is joy – “so that your joy may be full.” Instead, the question we should be asking about these verses is, “Are you going to the Father in the name of Jesus over and over and over again in prayer many times each day and saying, ‘I want the joy of my salvation. I want to stand firm in the faith. I don’t want anything to move me because I am so sure of my resurrection and inheritance’?” Are you going to the Father in prevailing prayer and, like blind Bartimeaus, crying out over and over again, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!”

If you'll do that, you will have Christian joy in your life. One last thing: Jesus says, "Whatever you ask of the Father *in my name*." You know what keeps me from prayer so often? My sin. I'll stumble in some way, I'll sin, and then I'll think, "I can't pray to God right now. I just blew it big time. Maybe if I'm good for a day or two I can pray, but right now I can't ask God for joy. I'd feel like a hypocrite."

That's exactly how the devil wants me to feel. Friends, it would only be hypocritical to pray after sin if I were asking in my name. If it were up to my record, then the Father would have no reason to answer me. But I'm not asking in my name; I'm asking in Jesus' name. His record is perfect, so the Father is always ready to hear prayers in his name and he doesn't even want your sin to stand in the way of Christian joy. God never commands his people anything he will not provide. So go to him in prayer and ask him to bring the reality of the resurrection into your life to give you joy today. AMEN.