

John 16:16-33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 16 verses 16 to 33. A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me. 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? So they were saying, What does he mean by a little while?

Well, we do not know what he is talking about. Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I mean by saying, A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me? 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.

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.

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. 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. Until now you have asked nothing in my name, ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech, but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf, for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me, and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father, and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world, and going to the Father. His disciples said, Ah, now you are speaking plainly, and not using figurative speech. Now we know that you know all things, and do not need anyone to question you. This is why we believe that you came from God. Jesus answered them, Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace, in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart,

I have overcome the world. At the end of John chapter 16, Jesus concludes his farewell discourse to his disciples. The end of John chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16 speak about the suffering and persecution that they will all experience in the world. Even in that situation of suffering and persecution, Jesus will give them his joy and his peace. The opening part of our passage focuses upon Jesus' riddle that he gives to his disciples in verse 16. A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me. In a somewhat amusing manner, this statement is repeated almost four times in succession in the verses that follow. It recalls earlier statements that Jesus had made to his disciples. John chapter 14 verse 19, for instance, yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. The meaning of Jesus' statement in verse 16 is not entirely clear.

[3 : 17] To what is the little while, or are the little wives referring? Are there two little wives, or merely one? If we read it as just one little while, it might be referring to the same thing from two different perspectives. In some sense they will see him no longer, and in another sense they will see him.

Another possibility is that Jesus is referring, in the first little while, to the period between his death and resurrection, and then in the second little while, to the period before his second coming.

We could also read this, first of all, as a reference to the period of Christ's death, when they will see him no longer, and then the little while referring to the period after the resurrection. Yet another possibility is seeing Jesus' departure not so much in terms of his death, as in terms of his ascension to the Father.

In such a framework, his coming to them will not primarily be through the resurrection, but through the gift of his spirit at Pentecost. Jesus gives the example of a woman struggling to give birth, and then the joy in the birth that follows the suffering of the birth pangs, as an example for understanding his death and resurrection. The language that Jesus uses, and the figures of speech that he employs, are important.

In talking about a woman, and her hour coming, Jesus is employing language that has a great charge within the Gospel of John. This language of the hour that comes is usually applied to his own death. Here, however, it's used in reference to a woman. Throughout the Gospel of John, there are a number of references to and stories involving women. Jesus' mother Mary, for instance, is not named in the book of John.

[4 : 44] Rather, she is spoken of, or spoken to, as his mother, or as woman. In speaking of and to Mary, in a less particularised way, I think the Gospel highlights her symbolic purpose.

She's significant as an individual, of course, but she's also significant for what she stands for. She is the mother, or the woman, who is about to give birth. Bringing a new man into the world after birth pangs is a paradigm for understanding what Jesus is going to do in his death and resurrection.

His death is an event of birth pangs, and his resurrection is being the firstborn from the dead. Jesus opens the womb of the tomb. Such a connection between the womb and the tomb is found throughout the Old Testament, and it continues into the new. We can think about poetic statements, such as knit together in the lowest part of the earth, in Psalm 139, referring to the womb. Or we might think about the statement of Job, naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I will return. That connection between the woman and the earth is also seen in the original judgments upon humanity, where the judgment upon the woman and her womb is paralleled with the judgment upon the man and the earth.

The womb and the earth are connected to each other. For the first man Adam, the earth was his womb. He was fashioned from the clay. Every subsequent human being comes from the womb of their mother.

Recognising the connection between the womb and the tomb, I think we can gain an insight into a deeper theology of the cross, as the cross is an event of birth pangs followed by birth. We'll see John picking up on the symbolism a bit more in his crucifixion account, but we should already register its presence here. After the resurrection and the ascension, the disciples will have greater access to the Father in Christ's name. Praying in Jesus' name does not mean praying for Jesus to pray for us, but rather on account of Jesus having privileged access to the Father, as we are known and loved by him. Now this more direct access to the Father should be related to the advocacy of the Spirit that is at work through and in us. We might think of this as Christ's gift of his Spirit by which we can pray with him and in him. When we approach the Father, we are not approaching a reluctant Father who has to be persuaded by the Son to take concern for the Church. He loves the Church himself, especially as he sees the Church and the disciples of his Son sharing his own love for his dearly beloved Son. Jesus wants his disciples to approach the Father with confidence, asking things in his name. This access to the Father and the union with Christ that they will enjoy is one of the causes of their joy as they will see

[7:16] Christ again. Even as their hearts are weighed down with sorrow at this point and will be weighed down further after Christ's death, the joy that they will experience in the resurrection will not be removed even by the ascension. Christ's departure then will not be an absolute departure. Rather, it is a departure that allows for a more intimate presence in and with them by his Spirit. Jesus warns his disciples once more about what's going to happen in the future. They are told they will soon be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. While it might seem in this situation that Jesus has been left alone, he will not in fact be alone as the Father will be with him. Even in the agony of the cross, the Father is there. This is important to bear in mind lest we overstate the reality of Christ's forsakenness. Jesus promises his disciples that in their time of tribulation, in their time of trial, they will not be left alone. He has already promised his disciples joy that will follow from their agony and their sorrow, and now he promises them peace within the world and his presence. He has overcome the world. Even all of the attacks that we might experience within the world are ultimately futile, the futile flailing of a felled foe. We should take good cheer, recognizing in Jesus' victory the definitive character of his overcoming of the world. The ruler of this world, who presumes that he has triumphed at this time, has been decisively and definitively defeated.

A question to consider. Once again, Jesus speaks about the new way that his disciples can address and approach the Father in prayer. This is a running theme of the farewell discourse, and chapter 17 will bring this theme of prayer to its most powerful and pronounced expression. What sort of theology of prayer might we develop from the discourse to this point? How might we trace the Trinitarian character of prayer from Jesus' teaching in the farewell discourse?