

“Ask and You Shall Receive”

The Fiftieth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 16:16-24, Isaiah 26:16-21

The disciples are about to participate in a series of events which will change the course of human history in ways they cannot yet comprehend. Jesus has gathered his disciples together in an upper room in Jerusalem to celebrate their final Passover together. After redefining the meaning of the Jewish Passover (he is the true Passover Lamb to which the Passover pointed), Jesus must now prepare his disciples for the great turning point in redemptive history (his death and resurrection). Jesus has but a few remaining moments to teach his disciples about his imminent death and resurrection; events which will usher in a whole new era in redemptive history, in addition to changing the lives of his disciples forever. Little do they know that they are about to become witnesses, to and proclaimers of, the saving work of Jesus Christ (the gospel), first in Jerusalem, and then on to the ends of the earth. Soon, he says, they will not see him, and then soon they will see him again. What does Jesus mean by this? Jesus will explain to them that he is about to die, and then will be raised from the dead, and then ascend into heaven.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are working our way through the Upper Room Discourse (which extends from John chapters 13-17), given during Jesus' last Passover celebration with his disciples. Jesus has given them the difficult news that he was departing from them, and then going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house (heaven) where (for the time being) they cannot come. Jesus has also told them that it is good for him to depart because he will send them the Helper (the Holy Spirit) from the Father who, as the third person of the Holy Trinity, will ensure that the disciples are not left on their own despite our Lord's return to the presence of the Father.

As the Upper Room Discourse unfolds, Jesus tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit will do a number of things for them after his departure (his ascension into heaven). First, The Holy Spirit will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment, because the world does not believe in Jesus. Second, the Holy Spirit will bear witness to the truth of all of the things Jesus has said and done in their presence. Third, the Spirit will enable the disciples to bear witness to the things that Jesus has told them—we see this play out in the Book of Acts when the disciples began preaching the Gospel to Israel on the Day of Pentecost. Fourth, when the Helper comes, he will bring to remembrance all of the things which Jesus taught the disciples—especially the words of Jesus, words which the Holy Spirit ensures are written down through the process of the inspiration of Scripture.

As we have seen, the disciples are struggling to understand all of the things Jesus is telling them. There is a great deal of new information being given them—much of it troubling to them (the news of Jesus' imminent departure, for one thing). From a theological perspective, the things Jesus was telling them were very difficult to fully understand. For one thing, they were having a hard time understanding how three divine persons were the one true God. They were also struggling with their expectations about the messianic kingdom—Jesus was clearly teaching something very different about the future of Israel than they anticipated. And then, the disciples were deeply saddened by the fact that their Messiah, Lord, and close friend, was leaving them. Given the way Jesus is speaking throughout the course of the evening, the disciples are beginning to realize that they would never see him again. As Jesus has told them, his hour has come. Everything is about to change. Jesus must prepare them for what is now to come.

As we saw last time, when we covered verses 4-15 of chapter 16, the disciples must have been in a sort of intellectual fog and an emotional funk after learning of Jesus' departure. Realizing that the disciples were very saddened upon learning the news that was leaving, and not truly grasping the meaning of what he was telling them, Jesus challenges them. *"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."* Twice, the disciples have asked Jesus about where he was going, but they really had never truly considered "why" he was going, as well as "why" it would be better for them if Jesus did depart and then send the Holy Spirit. There is simply no time left to be sad.

After reminding them that the Holy Spirit will come and then glorify Jesus by declaring to the disciples all of the things which the Father has entrusted to Jesus through his word, in verse 16 Jesus tells them, *"a little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me."* Since we already know how the story turns out in the end, we immediately know to what Jesus is referring—his death, followed by his post-resurrection appearances. The disciples, however, do not have the benefit of such hindsight, and so Jesus' words confuse them. We read in verses 17-18, *"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'? We do not know what he is talking about.'"*

Although the disciples do not understand what Jesus means, at least they seem to be actually wrestling with the meaning of Jesus' words—soon you will not see me, then you will. What they do not know is that by the next afternoon, Jesus will be dead. In the eyes of the world, Jesus was just another trouble-maker who was put to death by the Romans. It was common knowledge that Rome had no patience with religious upstarts who tried to upset the peace of occupied lands. The Jewish religious leadership saw Jesus as a blasphemer and heretic, who was possibly in league with the devil. The scribes and Pharisees had been plotting to kill Jesus for some time and Judas, apparently, provided the necessary inside information which the Sanhedrin needed to bring their plan to fruition. There were many others throughout Israel, no doubt, who believed in Jesus during the course of his messianic mission, only to have their faith dashed by the apparent and tragic end of his messianic ministry.

This is why it is so important that Jesus send the Helper, and that the disciples understand his person and work. What the Spirit will do for Jesus' disciples after his departure is confirm that Jesus died upon the cross that next afternoon as the true Passover Lamb—spotless (without sin). The Spirit will convince them that Jesus' death turned aside the wrath of God toward sinners, and that his death puts an end to the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant which had foreshadowed his once for all sacrifice for sin which secures for them peace with God. The Holy Spirit will create faith in Jesus in the disciple's hearts, and then confirm and sustain that faith during the difficult days to come. This is what Jesus means when he tells them that in a little while the disciples will not see Jesus (at least alive). He is telling them in so many words that he is about to die.

Yet, if Jesus' death at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans was a shock to their expectations, the idea of a bodily resurrection and the glorification of human nature was completely beyond expectation (i.e., "in a little while you will see me"). Jesus had raised several people from the dead to which the disciples were eyewitnesses, including someone they all knew quite well—Lazarus, and which had occurred just days before. Yet, even though these people were raised from the dead, they were not yet glorified, as Jesus was in his resurrection body. Lazarus would die again. Jesus could not.

Therefore, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ marks the dawn of the new creation, and is, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15, the firstfruits of the great resurrection harvest yet to come.

Indeed, Jesus will soon appear to the disciples alive, and bodily, after his victory over death and the grave on Easter. At one point Jesus will even ate fish with the disciples, and because he is merciful, he will allow the doubting Thomas to examine the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. After forty days, Jesus will ascend into heaven (as described in the first chapter of Acts) before sending to them the Helper on the Day of Pentecost, who will do all of the things for the disciples which Jesus promised. Then, they will finally understand why it was good that Jesus depart from them. This is the theological conundrum we've been discussing throughout our time in the Upper Room Discourse—Jesus' bodily absence from his people during the new covenant era. Because he must ascend into heaven and return to his Father, this is why he will send them the Holy Spirit, who creates a new and better reality for the people of God (indwelling them and uniting them to Jesus in heaven), despite our Lord's return to the Father.

I don't want to make it sound as though Jesus has carelessly waited until the last minute, and then overloaded the disciples with too information for them to process. It is important to remember that Jesus has done this for a reason. John tells us that Jesus was well aware this would evening be very difficult for the disciples, and that our Lord waited until now to reveal this information for two very important reasons. The first is given in verse 4 (of chapter 16). *"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you."* Since Jesus' hour has come, he will no longer be physically present with them. Now is the time to explain to them the major shift in redemptive history about to take place when he ascends into heaven to take his place at the Father's right hand. The second reason is given in verse 12. *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."* Jesus knows there is too much to reveal in their final evening together, but he also knows the power of the Holy, whom will help the disciples understand all of the things yet to be revealed after Jesus departs.

Jesus' level of concern for the disciples is very evident in verse 19, when he observed their reaction to his comments that they would not see him for a time, and then they would see him again, before he returned to the Father. We read in verse 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'?"* It is important questions such as these which cause Jesus to delay his departure for the Garden of Gethsemane. Indeed, he takes the time to answer these questions because of their importance. On a theological level Jesus knows that he is instituting a new era in redemptive history and that everything the disciples have believed about YHWH, sin and grace, and the role of Israel in the purposes of God is about to be turned upon its head. In fulfilling and reinterpreting so many Old Testament prophecies, Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost will change everything for the disciples, as well as the entire course of redemptive history.

On a personal level, Jesus knows that the disciples will face even more shocking news than that he was about to depart—Jesus is about to be arrested, face trial before Caiaphas and Pilate, and then be crucified. He knows that these events will create a situation in which the disciples will be terrified for their very lives, as they worry that what happened to Jesus might happen to them. Not mincing any words, Jesus tells them in verse 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."* Using the same pattern he just introduced in the previous verses ("soon you will not see me, and then soon you will see me"), Jesus informs them that they are about to be swept up in a wave of sorrow (in response to his death), which causes the world to rejoice (those who reject him and his message because they prefer to live in darkness).

There are several things worth noting. To begin with, Jesus uses the solemn “truly, truly,” formula which indicates the seriousness of his warning. The verbs Jesus uses, “to weep” and “to lament” (mourn) are words which are usually connected to weeping and mourning in connection with death.¹ This is about as direct as Jesus can get. “You are going to mourn and grieve, while the world rejoices.” But Jesus does not leave them without hope. He also makes it clear that their weeping and sorrow will soon turn to joy. In just hours, they will witness Jesus’ arrest, and they will go into hiding out of fear for what the Jews will do to the followers of Jesus once Jesus is not around to protect them. They will learn of his death sentence meted out by Pilate, and of his death by crucifixion. They will be crushed and heart-broken. Yet, on Easter, there will come a joy that is beyond anything they have ever known.

But John’s point is not to inform us of how the disciples will feel (as interesting as that might be to us). John is informing us that Jesus’ death provides a demonstration of how the unbelieving world responds to God’s accomplishing the salvation of sinners—the world rejoices at Jesus’ death. Conversely, the joy the disciples are about to experience is not temporary emotional relief upon learning that their friend and leader isn’t really dead after all. This joy is a permanent condition to be produced by the Holy Spirit in their hearts upon the disciple’s realization that in Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has overturned the curse (death) and that Jesus has triumphed over death and the grave. Is John speaking of human emotions and how the disciples will feel? Absolutely. But he’s also speaking of these emotions in the context of the earth-shattering events soon to transpire. Jesus is about to change the fundamental reality of human existence, and the disciples will be witnesses to it, with all of the attending human emotions.

As he did in the Olivet Discourse (which likely occurred late on Wednesday, the day before the Passover, as recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 19 and 21), Jesus uses the analogy of labor and birth to describe what is about to happen to the disciples. In verses 21-22, he tells them, “*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.*” The image of labor and birth which Jesus uses is found throughout the Old Testament (including Isaiah 26:16-21, our Old Testament lesson). In the Isaiah text we read of “*a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth*” (v. 17), as well as of a time when “*your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead*” (v. 19). Jesus’ words to the disciples resound with echoes from Israel’s prophets with which the disciples were well familiar.

The point of the analogy is that a woman endures unspeakable pain and anguish while giving birth. Then why do it, if it is so terrible? Because the joy brought by the birth of a child soon allows the woman to forget the pain she has just endured. On one level, the analogy is intended to let the disciples know that despite the trials they must soon endure, their sorrow will give way to joy. This is a wonderful word of hope Jesus which gives to these men who will soon see Jesus seemingly helpless before Caiaphas and Pilate (even though, of course, he is not), before they witness his lifeless body being removed from the cross and buried the next afternoon.

Yet on another level, Jesus is reminding the disciples that throughout the course of redemptive history, the people of God often are called to endure great suffering and times of hardship, which has then given ways to times of great joy (joy is not to be confused with mere happiness). The prophets demonstrate

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 543.

how this was the case for national Israel. We may think of the forty years in the wilderness, which led to Israel's eventual entrance into the promised land. These things point ahead to how this will be true of the Messiah when he comes. No doubt, it is hard to be happy while suffering, although one may certainly have joy in the midst of great suffering. Jesus' point is that the promises he has made to the disciples can only come to pass after a period of intense suffering. But such suffering is like the birth of a child—the joy which results from the suffering makes the whole thing well worth it. Jesus must suffer and die to bear the wrath of God so as to turn aside that wrath from us. And the unspeakable agony of the cross will give way to his resurrection and coronation as King of kings and Lord of lords.

One characteristic way Protestant theologians have discussed this labor and birth pattern, is in terms of Jesus' humiliation (from his incarnation until his burial) giving way to his exaltation in his resurrection, glorification, and ascension. So too, just as Jesus suffered and died (his humiliation) and was then raised from the dead (his exaltation), we must endure the trials and suffering of this life, before entering into the joys of the next. We should also notice that when Jesus speaks of a woman in labor, his analogy indicates that the labor begins when her hour has come. And Jesus has told them several times that his own hour is at hand. The disciples' agony is about to begin (just as it is for Jesus), but the joy Jesus has promised them will necessarily follow when the women discover the empty tomb on Sunday, and when Jesus appears to them, alive. Therefore, it is not until Jesus is raised from the dead that the disciples will experience the joy of which Jesus is speaking, and then they will understand the meaning of his words, "soon you will not see, and then soon you will see me."

In verse 23, Jesus now speaks of this in terms of the major shift in the course of redemptive history which will be brought about by his cross and empty tomb. Jesus says, "*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.*" There are several very important points here, and they have a direct bearing on how we are to relate to our risen and ascended Savior despite his physical absence from us.

The first point is eschatological (or tied to our view of the end times). When Jesus indicates "that day" will come, he is speaking of the new covenant era—the present age. We can also speak of this as the inter-advental age, because this encompasses the entire period of redemptive history lying between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, until his return to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new at the end of the age. This is the period of time during which Jesus will be physically absent, having ascended into heaven, where he will prepare a place for us. We currently live in "that day" with its various trials, sorrows, blessings, and joys, as we await that heavenly joy which no one can take from us.

A second point is that this is also the period of redemptive history in which the Helper (the Holy Spirit) is given to us and who unites us to Jesus, who is in heaven reigning over all things. This is the age in which we walk by faith, and not by sight, since Jesus is present with us through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and through the specific means he has given to us (word and Sacrament), as well as through prayer (in which the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us), fellowship (with the other members of the spiritual body of Christ), and through various gifts of the Spirit (which equip us to serve one another in love). This is the age in which, as Paul says, we see Jesus as in a mirror dimly until our Lord comes again at the end of the age, when we will see him face to face—not as the lowly carpenter's son, but as the glorified Lord of his church (as depicted in the opening chapter of the Book of Revelation).

Jesus explains why in "that day," i.e., after his resurrection and ascension, "*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.*" The disciples are to ask the Father for their needs to be met in the name of the Son (and as Paul adds in

Romans 8) through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, once Jesus leaves to return to the Father, Christians are to pray to the Father because a significant aspect of Jesus' work in preparing a place for us in heaven is fulfilled by his role as covenant mediator between God and humanity. If we ask the Father for our needs to be met in Jesus' name, through the power of the Holy Spirit, these things (as Jesus promised) will be given to us. In fact, says Jesus in verse 24, "*until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*"

Jesus' promise clearly indicates that the joy of which he is speaking is characteristic of the present age—"that day" after Jesus' resurrection on Easter (the age in which we live). Part of the difficulty we face in understanding and appropriating this wonderful promise is that so many of us have seen the havoc created by the so-called prosperity preachers who turn this passage and others like it, into a formula (which if used correctly) supposedly enables us to secure from God all of our material wants, or such things as guaranteed healing from all sickness and disease, or miracles which deliver us from all of life's uncomfortable circumstances. Jesus makes no such promises here, and to read Jesus' words this way is to distort the plain meaning of his words in a sinful, self-centered, and materialistic way.

What Jesus does promise his disciples is that since he is leaving them, they are to pray to the Father in his name (and implied, through the power of the Holy Spirit). The Father will give us what we seek, so that our joy may be complete. The promise Jesus makes to us is real, genuine, as well as supremely generous. It is to be claimed by Christians during all of our trials, suffering, and difficulties. If we ask the Father for what we need in time of trial, we will receive those things through which our joy may be full. God has made us a promise which we ought claim whenever we need help. But nowhere does Jesus promise us immediate and miraculous healing, great wealth, increased material possessions, and relief from our suffering. Neither does Jesus promise that God will end our suffering and difficulties in life simply because we don't like to suffer. After all, God ordains all of these trials to accomplish his purposes and bring about his will for each of us. God's will for our lives often includes illness, suffering, death, and loss. These things must come before the joy which Jesus promises. Labor comes before birth.

But Jesus does promise us that the Father will make our joy full and complete, if only we ask the Father for what we need in Jesus' name. In John's writings, joy is the profound sense that God is accomplishing his purpose, and implies the knowledge that all things will be made right in the end. John ties such joy directly to faith in Jesus' person and work, who sustains our joy during our suffering and trials.² Such joy is even present in spite of the hatred which will come to the people of God from the world—which Jesus has told us, we are sure to face. The great irony here is that a person undergoing times of great trial may be deeply saddened, and yet still know a profound sense of joy. Conversely, someone may be very happy with life's circumstances, yet never truly experience joy.

Have you asked the Father for what you need in the name of Jesus? Jesus promises to make your joy complete no matter what he calls you to endure. And if you still have any doubts about Jesus' promise, remember that the death and resurrection of Jesus (labor and then birth) is the proof that God can and does keep his promises. It is Jesus himself, who says to us, "*truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you . . . Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*"

² TDNT