



Title: From Sorrow to Joy

Text: John 16:17-33

Date February 6, 2022

Main Idea: Despite worldly sorrows, Jesus delivers joy to his followers

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXT: JOHN 16:17-33

John 16:17-33

Your Sorrow Will Turn into Joy

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.

I Have Overcome the World

²⁵ "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. ²⁶ 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; ²⁷ for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸ I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."

²⁹ His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰ 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." ³¹ Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? ³² 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. ³³ 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.”

Highlight – What stands out?

1. What words or phrases are repeated in this passage?
2. What ideas do you see here that you’ve heard before?
3. What image does Jesus use in verses 20-22 to make his point?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Look back at the image you wrote down in verses 20-22. What is Jesus saying about how they feel now and how they will feel in the future? Why do you think he used the imagery of childbirth?
2. What is the shift regarding how they ask for things from God that happens because Jesus leaves them (verses 23-28)?

Respond – What’s my next step?

Who in your life has sorrow and would benefit from Jesus’ presence in their life? What is one way you can be the hands and feet of Christ this week for them?

Commentary

Taken from [The Gospel According to John by D.A. Carson](#)

16:16. This verse is transitional. By referring to Jesus’ departure, it simultaneously closes off the topic introduced in vv. 4b–6, and sets the stage for the confusion of the disciples in vv. 17–18, which leads on to Jesus’ explicit treatment of his departure, as opposed to his treatment of the work of the Paraclete who comes in consequence of Jesus’ departure.

But which departure and return are in view? Does the first ‘little while’ mark the time until Jesus’ death, or until his ascension? Does the ‘you will see me’ after the second ‘little while’ refer to Jesus’ resurrection, the descent of the Spirit (*cf.* 14:23), or the parousia (14:1–4)? Or should we join the many modern commentators who think John is cleverly deploying his language to include double or treble references?

Despite the popularity of this latter view, the notes on the following verses argue that each bit of evidence makes most sense if this verse refers to Jesus’ departure in death and his return after his resurrection. The ‘little while’ after which the disciples will see Jesus no more has already been intimated both to the Jews (7:33) and to the disciples (13:33). Jesus will die. But then ‘after a little while’ his disciples will again see him: Jesus will rise from the dead. Some manuscripts add ‘because I am going to the Father’ to the end of the verse, probably to facilitate the transition to the second question in v. 17.

16:17–19. The disciples still have no category to allow them to make sense of a Messiah who would die, rise from the dead, and abandon his people in favour of ‘another Counsellor’ (14:16). Their perplexity provides the justification to the assessment Jesus has just rendered: they cannot yet bear all that Jesus wants to say to them (v. 12). They ask themselves what Jesus means by his words in v. 16, and link them to what Jesus had earlier said about going to the Father (v. 17; *cf.* v. 5). In particular they are perplexed by the double use of a *little while* (v. 18).

Jesus is fully aware (*egnō*, ‘knew’; *niv* ‘saw’; there is no reason to postulate supernatural knowledge) of their desire to question him, and repeats his

comment while preparing to address their confusion. That John includes double repetition of the words in v. 16 (vv. 17, 19) argues that he sees this departure 'in a little while' and return 'after a little while' as utterly central to the themes he has been developing in these chapters.

16:20. On the dramatic Assertive *I tell you the truth*, cf. notes on 1:51. This verse can only be referring to the grief of the disciples while Jesus was dead, and while the 'world' (*kosmos*; cf. notes on 1:9) was rejoicing at having disposed of him so decisively. The clause *your grief will turn to joy* refers to the transformation of the disciples' attitudes when they see the resurrected Jesus again. Arguments to the effect that this joy refers to the ecstasy Christians will experience at the parousia necessarily presuppose that grief characterizes them throughout this age until Jesus returns. That will not square with Jesus' promise of joy to his disciples *throughout* the Christian era (15:11), still less with John's report of the disciples' reactions when they saw the resurrected Christ: 'The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord' (20:20).

The verb 'to mourn' (*thrēneō*) occurs only here in the Fourth Gospel; the verb 'to weep' (*klaiō*) also occurs in 11:31, 33; 20:11, 13, 15, always in connection with death. In Luke 7:32, the two verbs come together at a funeral (even if it is a child's game). Similarly, 'grief' (*lypē*) is often caused by death (though not invariably: e.g. Rom. 9:2). Correspondingly, the joy the disciples are promised springs from Jesus' resurrection. This contrast controls the thought of the next four verses.

16:21. Jesus briefly illustrates the dramatic change from grief to joy by sketching in a non-narrative parable. The intense labour pains a woman commonly suffers in delivering a baby give way to satisfied joy that 'a child' (*anthrōpos*, properly 'a human being') has been born into the world.

The combination of intense suffering and relieved joy at childbirth is in the Old Testament a common illustration of the travail God's people must suffer before the immense relief and joy brought about by the advent of the promised messianic salvation (e.g. Is. 21:2–3; 26:16–21; 66:7–14; Je. 13:21; Mi. 4:9–10). Isaiah 26:16–21 is particularly important: it combines the figure of the woman in childbirth, the words 'a little while' and the promise of resurrection. The model of a woman in childbirth generated a popular metaphor in the Judaism of Jesus' day: 'the birth pains of the Messiah' refers to a period of terrible trouble that must precede the consummation. It is not unlikely that this verse alludes to this eschatological theme, only here the intense suffering is borne by the Messiah himself. This interpretation is strengthened by the use of *hōra* (properly 'hour'; niv 'time'): the word is pregnant with meaning in the Fourth Gospel, and is regularly related to Jesus' death and the dawning of the new age (cf. notes on 2:4). This means Jesus' death and resurrection are properly *eschatological* events. This does not mean that the Fourth Gospel confuses Easter and the parousia, or obliterates all distinction between them so that they mean the same thing (as Bultmann, p. 581, argues). Rather, John is here earthing his realized or inaugurated eschatology. By showing the coherence of

Jesus' death/exaltation with the parousia, he not only declares the former to be a properly eschatological event, but makes the entire period between Easter and the consummation the onset of the eschaton (cf. Hoskyns, pp. 487–489; Lindars, pp. 506–510). The same theme is further developed in the next two verses.

16:22. *So with you:* the illustration is now applied specifically to the circumstances of the disciples. The *Now* is proleptic: it eliminates the first 'little while' (v. 16) and views the cross as impending. Once the disciples rejoice, after the resurrection, *no-one will take away [their] joy*, because the resurrection of Jesus is not merely a discrete event but the onset of the eschatological age, the dawning of the new creation (cf. notes on 20:22), the precursor to the age of the Paraclete. The Greek behind *and you will rejoice* might more literally be rendered 'and your heart will rejoice' (*kai charēsetai hymōn hē kardia*): exactly the same words are found in Isaiah 66:14, in the context of promises of the consummation. The change from the expected 'you will see me again' to *I will see you again* is not meant to hint that the disciples will not *really* see him (for that would contradict vv. 16, 17, 19), but that Jesus' 'seeing' of them is far more foundational to the relationship than their seeing of him—a point Paul well understood (cf. Gal. 4:9, 'But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—...'). The thought is analogous to John 15:16: 'You did not choose me [though of course in one sense they did!], but I chose you [for that is the properly fundamental perspective] ...'

16:23. *In that day* or 'that day' or the like often in the New Testament refers to the last days, the end of the age (e.g. Mk. 13:11, 17, 19 par.; 14:25; Acts 2:18; 2 Tim. 1:12, 18; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 9:15). This does not mean that Jesus here refers to the end of history and *not* to the period after his resurrection, but that he is referring to the period after his resurrection *as* the end of history (cf. 1 Jn. 2:18, 'Dear children, this is the last hour'). Cf. 14:20.

In that day, after Jesus has risen and ascended and the Holy Spirit has been sent, *you will no longer ask me anything*. Rather, as the rest of the verse shows, his followers will ask the Father in Jesus' name. Although in classical Greek the verb 'to ask' (*erōtaō*) means 'to ask a question' rather than 'to ask for [something]' (which meaning was reserved for *aiteō*), in the Greek of the New Testament period *erōtaō* can have either force. Even in John, *erōtaō* sometimes means 'to ask a question' (1:19, 21, 25; 9:2, 19, 21; 16:5, 19, 30), and sometimes 'to ask for [something]' (4:31, 40, 47; 14:16; 16:26; 17:9). In the verse before us, *erōtaō* is used in the first clause ('you will no longer *ask* me anything'), and *aiteō* in the last clause ('my Father will give you whatever you *ask* in my name'). If the two verbs are roughly synonymous, with the meaning 'to ask for [something]', then the only contrast in the verse is between the disciples asking Jesus for things during the period of his public ministry, and their asking the Father for things after Jesus has risen. That certainly makes sense, and comports well with John's tendency to mix his verbs (cf. the second

fn. to v. 19). This verse is then taking up the theme of prayer 'in Jesus' name', a theme already developed in this discourse (cf. notes on 14:12–14; 15:7–8, 16).

It is just possible, however, that in addition to this theme, which in any case is found in the last half of the verse, the first clause, with *erōtaō*, may address a more immediate concern, viz. the disciples' repeated requests *for information*. 'In that day, you will no longer ask me anything', as you have been doing, for then you will truly know and understand. Christians are the ones who, by definition, truly know (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20), for it is a mark of the changing pattern of redemptive history under the new covenant that they have been greatly informed as to what God is doing: indeed, that is the very reason why Jesus has called them his 'friends' (cf. notes on 15:14, 15). 'That ... is *the eschatological situation*: to have no more questions!' (Bultmann, p. 583; emphasis his).

In the historical setting of the farewell discourse, this clause then becomes an incentive to wait just a bit longer, until they enjoy the understanding thus promised to them. In the evangelistic setting in which John writes, this clause becomes an incentive to 'close with' Christ and become a Christian, for only then can one truly settle one's religious qualms and questions and rest with quietness in the eschatological community of those who know God and are satisfied. On this reading, the next words, *I tell you the truth* (cf. notes on 1:51) introduce a further entailment of belonging to the period of rejoicing, the attainment of the prayer life already described in the discourse.

16:24. The disciples had certainly asked for things, and asked questions; but up to this point they had not asked the Father (v. 23) for things (the verb is *aiteō*; cf. notes on v. 23) *in Jesus' name* (cf. notes on 14:13): that was a privilege that belonged to the new order. Now, in anticipation of that new order, the disciples are exhorted, *Ask* (the verb is still *aiteō*) *and you will receive*. They are to do this in full recognition that this is the route to the joy Jesus had earlier promised them. If that joy is part of the matrix of consistent obedience (15:11), that obedience, that remaining in Jesus (15:4) and his love (15:9) and his word (8:31), is the matrix out of which fruitbearing springs, the fruitbearing that is the direct consequence of prayer (15:7, 8). Thus the connections amongst asking, receiving and complete joy in 16:24 turn out to be a compressed version of themes developed in ch. 15, but now more clearly set within the eschatological situation introduced by Jesus' death and resurrection.

16:25. Jesus has been speaking somewhat enigmatically, somewhat cryptically: *en paroimias* (niv 'figuratively') does not necessarily mean 'in a figure' or 'in a metaphor' or 'in a parable', but has to do with the obscurity of his utterances (cf. notes on *paroimia* at 10:6). The reference is therefore not restricted to the illustration of the woman in childbirth (v. 21); it embraces the entire discourse, and confirms Jesus' assessment of his disciples' current ability (v. 12). However, *a time* (*hōra*, 'hour': the reference is eschatological; cf. notes on 2:4; 16:21) *is coming* (cf. notes on 4:21, 23) when Jesus will speak *plainly* about his Father. The word *plainly* renders *parrēsia*, and has been used to refer to the public nature of Jesus' ministry (7:4, 26; 11:54); but, of greater relevance here, it

has also been used to refer to plain language as opposed to enigmatic or cryptic speech (10:24; 11:14).

This passage is often thought to be in irreconcilable conflict with Mark 4:33–34, where Jesus speaks to the crowds only in parables, but to his disciples privately ‘explained everything’. Here it is the disciples who are confused by Jesus’ utterances. In fact, the apparent discrepancy between John and Mark is superficial, and springs from quite different foci of interest. Here in John 16:25, the contrast is between what is enigmatic or cryptic during the ministry of Jesus, and what becomes plain or clear after Jesus’ death/exaltation and gift of the Spirit. It is not simply a matter of unpacking a figure of speech, of explaining a parable (as in Mk. 4:33–34). After all, even in Mark the disciples who had the narrative parables explained to them display no place whatsoever for a *crucified* Messiah (Mk. 8:33ff.). *None* of the Gospel writers suggests that *any* of Jesus’ disciples made much sense of the cross until *after* the resurrection. And it is in this most dramatic of divine self-disclosures, in this shame and triumph of death, in this eschatological victory of death and resurrection, that the ultimate significance of Jesus is to be found—and therefore also the clearest display of the character and purposes of God. Because John’s Gospel focuses so narrowly and thoroughly on these central points, the theme of the disciples’ misunderstanding or dim understanding is repeatedly underscored (e.g. notes on 2:22; 12:16; 13:7; Carson, ‘Mis’). Although all of Jesus’ life and ministry has been a manifestation of God (1:14, 18; 14:9), the veiling has been particularly acute because the disciples cannot fathom his references to his departure. With the dawning of the ‘hour’, with the coming of the new order, Jesus’ language from the days of his flesh will become clearer (14:26); Jesus himself, after the resurrection, will speak words that will lose their enigmatic character, words about his Father (16:25; Lk. 24:27, 44–48; cf. 20:17); and after his ascension, the Paraclete will continue to unpack the meaning of the revelation bound up with Jesus the Messiah (16:12–15).

16:26–27. In addition to the increased understanding the disciples will enjoy after the resurrection (v. 25), *in that day* they will ask (*aiteō*; cf. notes on v. 23) the Father for things in Jesus’ name. All these categories have been introduced (cf. 14:12–14; 15:7–8, 16; 16:23), but Jesus wants his followers to understand that the phrase *in my name* does not mean that they are thereby distanced from God. It does not mean that they are restricted to asking Jesus for things, and he conveys their requests to the Father; it does not mean (in Jesus’ words) that *I will ask the Father on your behalf*. Far from it: the *Father himself loves you*, and needs no prompting from the Son. After all, it was the love of the Father for the world that initiated the mission of the Son (3:16). Nor is this truth in conflict with New Testament passages that emphasize the intercessory work of the exalted Christ (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; cf. 1 Jn. 2:1). Rightly understood, such passages focus on the mediatorial role of the Son in the plan of redemption, and therefore on the basis of the Christian’s acceptance by God; they do not

stipulate a mechanical conveyancing of the Christian's prayers, as if Jesus' purpose were to restrict the believer's access to the Father.

The love of the Father that is in view in these verses is peculiarly directed toward the believers. Just as Jesus remains in his Father's love by being obedient to him (8:29; 15:10), and just as believers remain in Jesus' love by being obedient to him (15:9–11), so this circle of love is large enough to include the Father himself: he loves (*philei*; cf. notes on 5:20; 11:3; 21:15–17) the disciples because they love Christ and believe that he came from God (v. 27). The thought, in short, is an extension of 15:9–16.

16:28. If we follow the text as it is represented in the niv (see Additional Note), the words 'I came from God' in v. 27 are now expanded into what is almost a summary of Jesus' entire mission, in categories now familiar. It runs from the mission of the Son as the envoy of the Father (*I came from the Father*, cf. 3:16, 17), through the incarnation and the humiliation meted out to him by the world (*and entered the world*, cf. 1:10–11, 14), to the departure from the world (*now I am leaving the world*, cf. 14:19) and his return to his Father (*I am ... going back to the Father*—perhaps the dominant theme of chs. 14–17).

16:29–30. No misunderstanding is more pathetic than that which thinks it no longer exists. Ignoring or not comprehending Jesus' insistence that the time for speech without enigma lies just ahead, his disciples think he is already (note the repeated *Now* in vv. 29, 30) speaking 'without figures of speech' (cf. notes on v. 25). They happily confess that Jesus knows all things—which is probably not so much an affirmation of Jesus' omniscience as of his utter mastery of all he has to tell them about God and his ways. Implicitly, it is a confession that Jesus supremely reveals God, without rigorous thought as to the metaphysics of the situation. They add, *You do not even need to have anyone ask you questions*—whether to test his knowledge, or because he has often displayed supernatural knowledge of the thoughts of his interlocutors (e.g. 2:24–25; in this chapter, 16:19 is not a convincing instance). The final sentence, *This makes us believe that you came from God*, though formally embracing a true conclusion, betrays just how feeble a foundation supports the immature faith they have so far attained (cf. notes on 1:48–49; 4:19, 29). Even the over-confident *Now we can see* (*oidamen*, lit. 'we know') echoes other false claims to knowledge in this Gospel (e.g. 3:2; 6:42; 7:27; cf. Duke, pp. 57–59).

16:31–32. As in 6:68–70, human pretensions lead only to rebuke. Although Jesus' response in v. 31 could be taken as a quizzical question, richer irony is preserved if their words are repeated with heavy exasperation: lit. 'Now you believe!' Yet in one sense they had spoken more truly than they knew: Jesus did *not* need to question them to know what was in their minds, and he knew perfectly well that the coming test would find them all wanting. Peter had already been warned of his impending failure (13:38); now all the disciples are forced to face their fears as they hear a similar prediction that embraces them all.

The impending disaster is again announced in terms of the coming *hōra* ('hour'), but this hour *has come*—it is even nearer than the hour for plain speaking predicted in v. 25. The disciples' temporary defection is cast in the language of Zechariah 13:7, specifically quoted in Mark 14:27 par.; cf. Mark 14:50. But however badly he will be abandoned by his disciples, Jesus is assured of his Father's support: *Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me* (cf. 8:16, 29). Even so, Dodd's comment (*IFG*, p. 416 n. 1) is astute:

The damping down of an enthusiastic confession of faith might seem surprising, if we did not remember that it corresponds to a constant pattern, not only in the Fourth Gospel but elsewhere: cf. John 6:68–70, 8:38; Mark 8:29–33 (and parallels), 10:28–31, 38–40, 14:29–31. It is part of the character and genius of the Church that its foundation members were discredited men; it owed its existence not to their faith, courage, or virtue, but to what Christ had done with them; and this they could never forget.

Commentators frequently find two jarring notes in this verse:

(1) Some find it incongruous that after stressing the universal scattering of the disciples, the Evangelist nevertheless manages to place the beloved disciple near the cross (19:26–27). But surely this is not more difficult than the Synoptic report that when Jesus was arrested all his disciples forsook him and fled, even though Peter (and John?) returned to the High Priest's residence. The point is that all of Jesus' disciples did flee, and not even the beloved disciple, who loitered near the cross (as did, after all, some who taunted the Master), so identified himself with Jesus as to be arrested and share in his suffering. In ch. 21 the disciple whom Jesus loves returns, with others, to the fishing boats—a sign, perhaps, that he had still not found his way back to whole-hearted loyalty to his Lord.

(2) Some find that v. 32b stands in contradiction to the cry of desolation recorded in Mark 15:34 par. Certainly John focuses more acutely on Jesus' obedience and sublime courage than do the Synoptists, who instead emphasize the depth of his agony. Even so, it is somewhat harsh to diagnose contradiction when less depressing diagnoses are ready to hand. John 16:32b contrasts the Father's faithfulness with the fickleness of his followers, as Jesus takes the path of suffering and is brutally crucified. It does not assess what depth of revulsion the Father himself may have known when his Son was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), nor explore Jesus' sense of total abandonment, for some brief period of time, when only words quoted from Psalm 22:1 could begin to express his anguish. It is still less a 'solution' to argue that Jesus *felt* abandoned by his Father, but was not: so profound a mistake may please those determined to psychoanalyse people who have been off the scene for two thousand years, but it will prove unsatisfying to those who ponder what the cross achieved.

16:33. However grave the temporary defection of his disciples may be, Jesus looks beyond their collapse to their restoration, and ends the discourse with encouragement. Doubtless *these things* refers to the entire discourse: his purpose in expatiating at some length is so that his disciples *may have peace*, the peace that only he can give (*cf.* notes on 14:27). The two spheres of existence mentioned in this verse are constantly at odds. Christians belong to both spheres. *In this world* Christians will face *thlipsis* (niv ‘trouble’), often a reference to eschatological woes (e.g. Mk. 13:9; Rom. 2:9), sometimes a reference to persecution ((Jn. 15:18–16:4a; Acts 11:19; Eph. 3:13), and here (as in Mt. 24; Rev. 7:14) a reference to a combination of the two. By contrast, *in me*, Jesus assures them, they will have peace: this *in me* language is probably an extension of the metaphor of the vine (ch. 15). Whatever the trouble, the peace prevails, just as elsewhere the privilege of being more than a conqueror goes to those who are faithful under the most appalling opposition (Rom. 8:31–39).

The fundamental ground for perseverance of this order is the triumph of Jesus: *I have overcome the world* (*cf.* 12:31; 1 Cor. 15:57; 1 Jn. 2:13–14; 4:4; 5:4–5). Jesus is not so opposing the church and the world (*kosmos*; *cf.* notes on 1:9) that there can be no conversions from the latter to the former (17:20; 20:29). Nor does the verb rendered ‘overcome’ (*nikaō*) merely refer to a personal overcoming, the preservation of personal integrity in the face of protracted opposition. Rather, the verb indicates victory; Jesus has *conquered* the world, in the same way that he has defeated the prince of this world. Jesus’ point is that by his death he has made the world’s opposition pointless and beggarly. The decisive battle has been waged and won. The world continues its wretched attacks, but those who are in Christ share the victory he has won. They cannot be harmed by the world’s evil, and they know who triumphs in the end. From this they take heart, and begin to share his peace.

Additional note

16:27–28. The words ‘I came from the Father’ at the beginning of v. 28 are omitted by a small but powerful combination of manuscripts. Verses 27–28 would then run together: ‘... that I came from God and entered the world ...’. If the shorter reading is original, the expansion is meant as an improvement (as in 14:4). But the textual evidence for the short text is not as strong as in 14:4, and brief repetitions are so much a pattern of Johannine style that the longer reading is probably original. At the end of v. 27, some manuscripts attest ‘from the Father’ instead of ‘from God’. The former is marginally more likely if we adopt the shorter reading in v. 28; the latter is more likely if we follow the longer reading reflected in the NIV and most other English versions. Other variants in these two verses are less consequential.¹

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). [*The Gospel according to John*](#) (pp. 546–550). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.