

Chapter 16

The Gospel of John

Chapter 15 ends after Jesus warns his disciples that they will encounter opposition and hostility from the world. However, so as to provide them some assurance of the fact that they will not be left to deal with this on their own, he also promises them the gift of the “Advocate,” the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said before, one of the roles of the Spirit is to testify to him. This will bring the disciples the assurance of Jesus’ presence with them and also bring the ability to testify on his behalf. While “the world” may show hostility to them and their message, the Holy Spirit will give them the ability to respond in a truthful way.

Continuing this discussion in Chapter 16, Jesus bluntly warns them that they will be excluded from the Jewish synagogues and perhaps even killed. The people doing this will regard such actions as “worship” because, to them, Jesus’ disciples are telling falsehoods that dishonor God. Therefore, to eliminate them would be to honor God. Jesus then says that he shares these things so that when they happen, they will remember what he said and thereby refrain from coming to the wrong conclusion, a conclusion such as the idea that God had abandoned them, or worse yet, that Jesus was not the Messiah.

When John, or someone who was a member of his community, wrote these things down, this is precisely what was happening. Close to the turn of the first century, Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogues, and there was a curse added to the Jewish liturgy against the “Nazarenes.” The Jews were redefining and consolidating what it meant to be a Jew and who were to be included at this time. The temple had been destroyed, Jerusalem was in ruins, and several Jewish sects no longer were in existence. So they had to rebuild. This they did on the basis of the Mosaic Law which necessarily excluded Christians. Thus, what Jesus is telling them in this text is actually going on at the time the text was written.

Jesus then refers once again to the fact that he will soon no longer be with them. He wonders why they didn’t ask where he was going. (In fact, Thomas had asked but the answer Jesus provided was not understood.) Now, as he points out, their hearts are sad and grieving at the prospect of not having their teacher and master with them any longer.

Jesus then explains that despite the grief, the fear, and the insecurity caused by his bodily departure, this will actually be for their good. It is because of his death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father that the Holy Spirit will come. And when the Spirit comes, the Spirit will bring resurrection life into their hearts so that the victory over sin and death won by Jesus will be theirs through the gift of the Spirit living in them. In other words, the salvation Jesus accomplished will be theirs because, in Jesus’ absence, the Spirit will confer this victory into them. The Spirit will grant them eternal life because the Spirit lives in them. The Spirit will make them right with God

(righteous), thereby overcoming sin because the Spirit will sanctify their lives and enable them to obey God's commands to love. The Spirit's presence will remove the power of evil because, with and in the bond of love that describes who the Spirit is, the power of evil--non-being—will be rendered impotent.

And so Jesus says (paraphrasing his words) the Spirit will prove their enemies wrong with respect to sin—because he has eliminated it. About righteousness--because his ascension to the Father proves that he had the authority to make them righteous (i.e., right with God); and about judgment--because through what he had done, the “ruler of this world has been condemned” (i.e., is no longer a threat to them).

Jesus then once again reminds them of the role of the Spirit as teacher. Because the Spirit enlightens us through his presence and because the Spirit gives us a share in divine love and life, our hearts are filled with the light of God's presence. When Jesus says, “...he will take what is mine and declare it to you...” he is affirming that the divine gifts we receive through faith in Jesus Christ (new life, love, righteousness, strength, hope)--all these things belong to Jesus because they define his very being as the divine Son of God. Weak, fallible, and mortal human beings don't have these things by nature. In order to have them as the spiritual blessings that are born in our hearts, they must be given to us. This the Holy Spirit does.

So, the advantage Jesus is talking about with respect to his departure is exactly this: because he ascends to the Father and is no longer with the disciples—or us—he can thereby send the “Advocate” who bestows these spiritual blessings on us. By these, we become victors. By these, we are freed from the power of sin and death. By these, we are raised up to new life and are no longer enslaved to the dark forces that lead to death. “Because he lives, we shall live also...and nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.” (Romans 8)

One last time Jesus repeats yet again that they will soon no longer see him. But he follows that up with the statement that in a while they will see him. Again, in his present state as another human being just like them, he will soon be gone. Clearly, Jesus feels the need to prepare his disciples well for what is to come. And so there is this back and forth between grief over his departure and joy when he returns in the power of the Spirit.

He then turns to making a comparison that will help them understand what this is all about. They will be like a woman giving birth. First, there is anguish and pain when she goes into labor. They too will experience anguish and pain over his disappearance. However, when the baby is born, there is such joy that the pain is largely forgotten. Similarly, they will receive new birth in the Spirit after Jesus is gone. And this new birth of life, love, hope, etc. leads to great joy. Forgotten is the pain that preceded this new birth. “On that day” they can ask for anything and he will grant it. For they will now be “Children of God,” born of the Spirit of God, and their “joy will be complete.”

Jesus, of course, is speaking of the goal and end point of the Christian life. He is referring to that time when the new birth is complete and salvation is fulfilled. This is the goal of human existence. Our lives as people of faith are teleologically directed. That is, they are moving toward an ultimate goal.

Just as an artist or a builder has a goal in mind—a vision—for what he is creating, just so, God has a goal in mind for his recreating work in us. He is leading us to completion, defined by total joy, love, and life. We are in the process of being perfected for the Kingdom of God and the beatific vision where we will behold the glory, the beauty, the goodness, and the majesty of God. This is the fulfillment of the promise of salvation.

In the meantime, just as a woman struggles in pain to give birth to a new human being, just so, we struggle as our perfect, spiritual self is being born. Under the influence of the Spirit who brings Jesus the victor into our hearts, we struggle with the constant harassment of our sinful impulses, the power of evil in its many forms, and with the power of death. These things try to pull us back and away from the influence of the Holy Spirit. They cause worry, loss, fear, anxiety, and the threat of despair. Some folks believe that the ultimate power behind all of these enemies of life and threats to our wellbeing is a malevolent force called “the devil.” But whether a person envisions a demonic presence or not, the struggle is very real.

In order for us to survive, thrive, and reach the goal, God has given us the means of grace. Through the word, the sacraments, and prayer, God comes to us with his power to overcome these threats. The divine Spirit, who conveys the presence of Christ, is stronger than the enemies of life. He, Jesus, has demonstrated that in his death and resurrection.

What faith, a gift of the Spirit, sees is that Jesus’ victory over these enemies of life is our victory as well. Jesus didn’t engage this battle for himself. He, being the preexistent Son of God, had no need to win this victory for himself because he was already God, and not subject to sin, evil or death. Rather, he engaged this battle on our behalf. He assumed our sin. He became the Prodigal Son who wandered off from his father and thereby ended up in a pigpen. And taking our sin on himself, he experienced God’s “No” to sin by dying on the cross. After God’s “No” to sin was carried out--because he endured this on our behalf--our sin was cancelled out. It is no longer held against us.

Moreover, this “No” to sin was in service to God’s “Yes” to righteousness and life. God did not say “No” to Jesus. He said “No” to the sin Jesus assumed from us. And since the sin that Jesus assumed was our sin, and since God judged and rejected this sin, it is no longer there in God’s eyes. Our sin was effectively removed and dealt with. In Christ we are no longer sinners but rather pure, righteous, and innocent before God.

Having judged and condemned the One person who became a sinner for everyone else, God then said “Yes” to Jesus. He raised him from the dead, making him the One person who can in turn raise us. Faith sees Jesus’ victory as our victory precisely because it was our sin that was condemned in him, and precisely because his resurrection is

therefore our resurrection as well. After all this occurs, the Holy Spirit returns with the gifts of resurrection life.

This results in the paradoxical situation that, because we are declared righteous and free of sin for the sake of Christ, nevertheless, in actuality we are still struggling with and exist in bondage to sin. The promise of redemption has been fulfilled in Christ. But in actual fact, we continue to struggle with the threatening danger of sin as it still lives in us.

So what is it? Are sin and death overcome in our lives or not? Are we to consider ourselves redeemed, or under judgment and condemnation from God? The answer is “Yes” and “Yes”. In Christ, we are already redeemed. But in order for that promise to become actual, Christ the victor must live in our hearts and make it so. The Holy Spirit conveys Christ into our hearts and actualizes the promise in us.

How does that happen? The Holy Spirit makes it so when we believe it is so. That is, when we trust with our hearts, and believe with our minds that Christ has redeemed us, it comes true. As Luther said, the Holy Spirit creates the faith to believe that we are redeemed in Christ. This means that through the work of the Spirit in us, the promise of redemption is fulfilled in the very act of believing it to be so.

So yes, Jesus won the victory over our sin and death. We did nothing. He did it all. As the Spirit calls us into faith in this promise, it becomes true for you and for me.

This then clarifies that our struggle is not to overcome sin and death through works or spiritual heroics. Our struggle is to come to believe that Jesus has saved us even though our experience with ourselves tells us otherwise. While the judgment against us and our sin has already been atoned for on the cross, nevertheless, sin continues to have power over us in the form of temptation, disobedience, and disregard for others. In order to actualize what Jesus did for us, we need to ask for and rely upon the power of the Spirit to give us faith that, in Christ, we are redeemed. For this reason, Jesus said this: “This is the victory—faith.”

Jesus ends this discussion (which I have elaborated on for the sake of clarity) by saying, “...take courage. I have conquered the world.” That is, we don’t conquer the sin and evil in the world, and what the reality of sin and evil do to the world. For this, I would simply refer you to the newspapers. The consequences of sin and evil and death are quite clear for everyone to see. What is not clear for everyone to see is that a loving God has taken on this struggle on our behalf, that he has won a victory over these existential threats, and that he has secured our destiny in the Kingdom of God.

However, this message could become clearer than it currently is. Many people haven’t heard it rightly and therefore have a distorted way of understanding it; many people who are perhaps even hungry to hear it, as were the masses at the dawn of Christianity 2000 years ago, and who are waiting to hear it, are out there. Of course, there are also some who, for a variety of self-centered reasons are not open to hearing it as well. Jesus

had advice for the believers about those folks. “Don’t throw your pearls before swine.” As for the others, they are there, and it’s up to each and every person of faith to make it heard. “As the Father sent me, so I send you.”

Chapter 17 is referred to as Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer.” In the previous chapters, Jesus has been giving his disciples assurances that even though he will be leaving them, nevertheless, he will return to them in another way. He will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will convey his spiritual presence into their hearts.

However, in the next chapter, Jesus will turn from his disciples and address the Father himself. He will not be praying for himself. He will be praying for them. Such was his love for them that, even though they would abandon him, he never abandoned them. After next week, we will turn to this prayer and begin the story of the passion according to John.