

*Series: The Upper Room Discourse*

## **John 16:16-24**

### **The joy of being seen**

by Scott Grant

#### **Turnaround**

The tiny 4-year-old boy approached the big-league ballplayer, held out a baseball and asked for an autograph. Most players, if they sign at all, will barely acknowledge those making such requests. This player was different. "I'll sign your ball," he responded, "if you'll sign my bat. This way, when you get to the big leagues, I will already have your autograph."

The boy was flabbergasted. What must have run through his head? He approached this big important person for an autograph. And this big important person wants *his* autograph? Unheard of! The player not only acknowledged the boy, he valued him. He saw the boy as someone who was important, even though he wasn't big. The boy was blown away by the way the player looked at him.

How does Jesus look at us? Does he barely acknowledge us? Does he look askance at us? In John 16:16-24, Jesus acknowledges us and doesn't look askance. In fact, there is something in the way that he sees us that has the capacity to blow us away. Being seen by Jesus turns sorrow into joy.

In the previous section, John 16:5-15, Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all the truth, which means the truth about Jesus. The Holy Spirit, then, leads us to Jesus. In John 16:16-24, we find out what we'll see when we get there.

#### **The question that leads to joy**

John 16:16-19:

*(16) "A little while, and you will no longer behold me; and again a little while, and you will see me." (17) Some of his disciples therefore said to one another, "What is this thing he is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not behold me; and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'Because I go to the Father'?" (18) And so they were saying, "What is this that he says, 'A little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." (19) Jesus knew that they wished to question him, and he said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not behold me, and again a little while, and you will see me'?"*

Verses 16, 17 and 19 contain an identical refrain that concerns first not beholding Jesus shortly and second seeing Jesus shortly.

All along in the Upper Room Discourse, he has spoken of his departure to the Father. John, the author, in John 13:1, wrote that Jesus knew that the time had come for him to "depart out of this world to the Father." Jesus told the disciples this in John 14:12, 28 and 16:10. Via the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, he was returning to the Father, the one who sent him. Therefore, he told the disciples that in "a little while," they would no longer behold him.

Then again, in a little while they would see him. When is this time? He could be referring to the resurrection or his next coming. But all along, he's been talking of returning to them in the person of the Holy Spirit. In John 14:17, Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be "in" the disciples. Then in the following sentences, using language reminiscent of the wording in this passage, he said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will

come to you. After a little while the world will behold me no more, but you will behold me" (John 14:18-19). Seeing Jesus, then, is equated with the coming of the Holy Spirit, who arrived for the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2. The immediate context favors such an interpretation, because the subject of the preceding section (John 16:5-15) was the Holy Spirit.

In referencing the departure and return of Jesus, John uses the words "behold" and "see." Knowing John's fondness for synonyms, it would seem that distinctions in meaning should not be assigned to the two words.

The disciples don't understand what Jesus means. They are also confused by earlier statements concerning his departure to the Father (John 14:12, 28; 16:5). They have connected the statement in verse 16 - "A little while and you will no longer behold me; and again a little while, and you will see me" - with his statement concerning his departure to the Father. And well they should, for his departure to the Father means both that they will not see him, when he leaves, and that they will see him, when he sends the Holy Spirit from the Father (John 15:26). Although Jesus has told them all this, they don't understand it yet.

Therefore, they deliberate among themselves. In John 16:5, they didn't question Jesus about his destination, though he apparently understood that they had every reason to. They were too self-absorbed in their own fear to question Jesus then. They were afraid to ask a question, because they were afraid of the answer. Although they are not questioning Jesus now, they are moving forward in that they're asking each other. Fearing the answer, they haven't moved forward to the point where they ask Jesus directly.

Jesus, however, knows that they wish to question him. He either overheard them or observed them and discerned not only that they were confused but that they "wished" to question him. Again, the disciples are moving forward. They're still too afraid to question him, but they now at least want to question him.

The Lord recognizes this and himself enables them to take the final step. He himself gives utterance to their unasked question. He tells them, in so many words, "This is what you want to know, isn't it?" Jesus draws out their unasked question.

The disciples' question ultimately concerns their relationship to Jesus. "Beholding" and "seeing" Jesus mean being with Jesus, knowing him and relating with him. They're afraid to ask the question concerning their relationship with Jesus because they're afraid of the answer. They're afraid that they won't be with Jesus.

The biggest questions we have in life revolve around our relationship with Jesus - questions such as, "Is he real?" "Is he here with me now?" "If he's here now, why does he seem so distant?" "Will he leave me?" "Am I good enough for him?" "If he really knows all there is to know about me, can he really be with me?" These are deep questions - so deep, in fact, that we may not even know that we entertain them. We've buried them deeply, because we're afraid of the answers.

But Jesus surfaces them. He led the disciples along, first by telling them that they weren't questioning him (16:5), then by confronting them with further truth (16:16) and finally by raising the question that by this time was just below the surface (16:19). He does the same with us, eventually giving definition to our unasked questions about our relationship with him.

He did this for me in the winter of 1991. I was taking a class on Galatians, which was also being preached in church. I was studying it, I heard the teacher's view, I heard the other students' views and I heard the preacher's view. Galatians speaks of God's acceptance of me being unaffected even by my biggest failures. As the winter progressed, there was a creeping feeling within me that I finally articulated with the words, "I don't believe it." Before, I thought I believed it. But as I was confronted with the truth of God's acceptance of me on the one hand, and how I was frantically looking for acceptance on the other, I was finally able to acknowledge my own truth that I hadn't believed the truth. That enabled me ask the question, "Is it true?" That question was always there, but it was buried, because I was afraid of the answer. I was afraid that it wasn't true. Jesus surfaced my unasked question.

The Lord, of course, doesn't surface such deep questions without answering them. And as we might

suspect, if Jesus is giving the answers, we need not fear them. The questions, in fact, lead to joy.

## The return that brings joy

John 16:20-22:

*(20) Truly, truly I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy. (21) Whenever a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she remembers the anguish no more, for joy that a child has been born into the world. (22) Therefore, you too now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one takes your joy away from you."*

In this section, the noun "sorrow" and the verb translated "be sorrowful" appear four times, while words with similar meanings ("weep," "lament" and "anguish") appear three times. The noun "joy" and its verb, "rejoice," appear five times. Each time a word associated with sorrow is used, it is contrasted with joy. In 16:16-19, not beholding Jesus and seeing Jesus were paired. In this section, sorrow and joy are paired. Not beholding Jesus causes sorrow; seeing Jesus causes joy.

Jesus tells them that they will "weep and lament." These words are associated with mourning a death in Luke 7:32, where "sang a dirge" is the same word for "lament" (*threneo*), and in Jeremiah 22:10. No longer beholding Jesus, then, has something to do with a death that causes mourning - ultimately, the death of Jesus that devastated the disciples.

Far from mourning the death of Jesus, the world will rejoice. The world's "joy" is dependent on the absence of Jesus. His presence would force them to confront the painful truth of their rejection of God, so they run from Jesus. How sad that the world's "joy" is dependent on the absence of Jesus, the only one who can give it true joy.

The disciples, on the other hand, will grieve over the absence of Jesus, but their sorrow will be turned to joy when they see Jesus again, initially after the resurrection and continually in the person of the Holy Spirit, who will come to dwell in them.

To illustrate the sorrow and joy that the disciples will experience, Jesus speaks of childbirth. This illustration has messianic overtones, for Isaiah pictured Israel as a woman in travail (Isaiah 26:17-19, 54:1, 66:7-10), and John himself refers to Israel as such (Revelation 12:1-6). Jesus sees the disciples, all Jews, as faithful Israel on the verge of giving birth. No longer does faithful Israel constitute the 12 tribes but the 12 disciples, minus one at this point. The disciples will experience the birth pangs of bringing forth the messiah. Meanwhile, the rest of Israel, whom Jesus refers to as "the world," will rejoice.

Over and above the messianic implications of the illustration is the simple application of sorrow and joy associated with childbirth. The sorrow and anguish of a first-century woman was much more acute than it is now for a woman. Childbirth then often meant the death of the woman. Such anguish, though, melts into the background when a child is born. Joy overwhelms sorrow.

Just like a woman experiencing birth pangs, the disciples have sorrow, and will have more sorrow, over the departure of Jesus. On the other hand, just like a rapturous new mother, the disciples will experience joy when Jesus sees them again, first after the resurrection and continually after the Holy Spirit comes.

Up until this point, we expect the joy to be connected with the disciples' seeing Jesus. The repeated words "you will see me" (16:16, 17, 19) set us up for this. The sorrow would seemingly be attributed to not seeing Jesus, and the joy would seemingly be attributed to seeing Jesus. But that's not what Jesus says. He doesn't tell the disciples that "you will see me" but that "I will see you." And when he sees them, he tells them, "your heart will rejoice" (*chairo*). Jesus here is likely quoting Isaiah 66:14: "Then you shall see, and your heart shall be glad" (*chairo* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament). But in quoting it, he changes the subject from "you" to "I" - another indication that what's important here is not seeing Jesus but being seen by Jesus. The disciples' joy is attributable to being seen by Jesus.

How is being seen by Jesus a source of joy? How does being seen by anybody affect us? It all depends on how we perceive that person seeing us. If we think someone is happy to see us, we'll be happy. If we think someone is sad to see us, we'll be sad. It's usually not that difficult to tell. Someone's face usually gives away how he or she feels.

How do we feel about Jesus' seeing us? We have a predisposition against being seen, because we're afraid that if people truly see us, they won't like us. And if there's someone who could see everything, say, Jesus, we may be inclined to run for cover. But clearly, being seen by Jesus is a source of joy for disciples of Jesus. There must be something in the way he sees us that should be a source of joy. He must be happy to see us. Jesus Christ, the Lord of all creation, is happy to see us. His face is beaming. If we could only see it. Then again, we can see it, because the scriptures give us a picture of the face of Jesus, which beams, believe it or not, when he sees us.

We may be sorrowful, feeling somehow that Jesus is far away, if he were ever here in the first place. We may perceive Jesus as being distant, offended by something distasteful in us. This causes us deep-seated anguish that we may not be able to articulate, too afraid to truly ask any question pertaining to our relationship with Jesus. But Jesus surfaces the questions and gives us the answers. Yes, he's delighted to see us, and if we understand that, our "sorrow will be turned to joy."

In the musical "Man of La Mancha," Don Quixote calls Aldonza, a sorrowful harlot, "my lady" and "Dulcinea, my little sweet one." She can't believe it. "Dulcinea!" she says. "My God, he knows my whole life story. I'm a slut. Yet he is calling me Dulcinea." Don Quixote saw Aldonza as "my little sweet one." Her sorrow was turned to joy, and her heart rejoiced. Jesus sees each of his followers this way, as his sweet ones. What will that do to our sorrow? What will it do for our hearts?

Jesus says the joy that comes from being seen by him will not be taken from the disciples by anyone. Seemingly, the Jewish leaders were taking the disciples' joy away from them, because they were taking Jesus away from them. But when Jesus returns in the Holy Spirit, he will be with them forever (John 14:16). No one can take our joy away from us, because Jesus is the source of our joy, and no one can take him away from us. This eternal joy of being seen by Jesus is contrasted with the "little while" of 16:16-19. After he departed, it would only be a little while before he returned. But when he returned, he would stay forever. Jesus is here. He is here forever.

We often hear people saying, in reference to some accomplishment of theirs, perhaps clinging to the trophy symbolizing the feat, "They can't take this one from me." My response is usually, "Who would want to?" What's the accomplishment worth? How long will it last? How sad that something so fleeting is someone's greatest source of "joy," when the true and eternal source of joy is beckoning.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah, in reference to the Jews' expected return from exile: "And the ransomed of the Lord will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:10).

Being seen by Jesus brings joy. There is also something Jesus wants us to ask for that will fulfill joy.

### **The petition that fulfills joy**

John 16:23-24:

*(23) And in that day you will ask me no question. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for something in my name, he will give it to you (24) Until now you have asked for nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full.*

"That day" is a likely reference to the day of Pentecost. And in that day, Jesus tells his disciples, they will not have any questions for him. Earlier, Jesus seemed to be encouraging questions, and he himself asked - and answered - their unasked question. But when he comes to dwell in them eternally, they won't have any questions. That's because all questions melt away in the presence of Jesus. Our biggest questions concern

our relationship with Jesus, and his presence gathers up all those questions and answers them all simply with, "I am here." His presence defines life; troubling circumstances don't define it. We'll go through cycles of asking questions and finding Jesus until we finally see him face to face.

A lot of us may be storing up long lists of questions that we plan to spring on Jesus when we see him face to face. But when we see Jesus, we won't care about the questions. We'll see the way he sees us, and we'll fall at his feet in adoration. Nothing else will matter.

Until then, Jesus encourages us to ask questions. Not only that, he encourages us to ask the Father for something. This doesn't mean we can't ask Jesus, but Jesus wants us to know we have direct access to the Father as well. The indefinite pronoun "something" (*ti*), which is not plural but singular, can be translated "anything" (NASB, NIV), but can also be translated "something" or "a certain thing." Another possible translation value is "a certain one." At first glance this would seem unlikely, inasmuch as the gender of the pronoun is neuter, not masculine or feminine. But the word for "Spirit" (*pneuma*) is also neuter. Jesus' return in the person of the Spirit is what will produce joy in the disciples (verses 20 through 22), and the result of asking the Father for this certain thing will also produce joy. Are we to assume that the source of joy in verse 24 is different from the source of joy in verse 22? Probably not. The source of joy in both cases is being seen by Jesus, and it is the Holy Spirit who brings this about. Jesus may simply be inviting the disciples to pray that the Father would send the Spirit. The application of one of Jesus' parables included encouragement to pray that the Father would send the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), and the Spirit may have been one of the prayer items in Acts 1:14.

The disciples are to ask for this thing in the name of Jesus. We've seen this before in the Upper Room Discourse, and it concerns our asking the Father for what Jesus wants.

Up until now, Jesus says, they haven't asked in his name, because they haven't fully grasped who he is and that knowing him gives them direct access to the Father. Now, he encourages them to ask. Such asking will be answered by the Father's giving and their receiving. The final result will be the fulfillment of their joy.

If Jesus is asking the disciples to ask the Father to send the Spirit, how does it apply today to believers in Christ, who have already received the Spirit? The Spirit, as we have seen in the Upper Room Discourse, nurtures our relationship with God. Jesus said he would see the disciples again in the person of the Holy Spirit, creating joy in them. The Spirit is in us, and Jesus is seeing us as well. The Spirit desires to show us how Jesus is seeing us. We don't need to ask the Father to send the Spirit, but we can ask the Father to quicken the Spirit to show us Jesus.

Before, Jesus encouraged the disciples to petition the Father in his name for the bearing of fruit (15:16), which he defined as love for one another. Jesus told them about this so that their "joy may be made full" (15:11), the same words that are used in 16:24. Jesus wants us to ask the Father to give us love for one another and for an intimacy with Jesus that understands his delight in us. Both requests, once granted, produce full joy. Joy is not the only thing the two requests have in common, for they are related to each other. The first is rooted in the second. We can love one another only insofar as we are intimate with Jesus. In that we are intimate with Jesus, we can love one another.

So we are to ask for intimacy with Jesus. It produces joy that lasts, which no one can take from us (16:22), and joy that is full (16:24). Our joy won't be fulfilled by anything less than Jesus.

One of the amazing things about this is that we are to ask for this intimacy in the name of Jesus - meaning, it's something that he wants, and it's something that he wants us to ask for. What we want most of all, though we may not know it, is intimacy with Jesus. He, of course knows this, and more than that, he wants intimacy with us! He's inviting us to ask the Father for it. It's as if he's looking at us with a knowing smile and a wink, saying, "Go ahead. Ask the Father." All the while he knows that this is what we want and that the Father will give it to us.

When I was 6 years old, the thing I wanted most in life was to ride in an airplane. My father came home from work one day and asked me if there was something that I really wanted to do. He knew that I wanted

to ride in an airplane. He also had the tickets in his pocket. But he wanted me to experience the joy of receiving what I asked for. Likewise, Jesus knows what we want - intimacy with him. And he can't wait for us to ask the Father for it, for he knows the Father will freely grant it and make our joy full.

### **Joy, joy, joy**

Being seen by Jesus turns temporary sorrow into eternal joy. Jesus surfaces the deep questions that pertain to our relationship with him, ultimately leading to joy. Through the Spirit he enables us to see the way he sees us, which brings joy. And finally, he asks us to ask the Father for intimacy with him, which makes our joy full.

- SCG, 1995

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