

“John: Sorrow Into Joy”

Isaiah 35:3-10 • John 16:16-33

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • January 28, 2024

How's your joy? Think about that for a moment. If we asked ten people to describe you, how many of them would use the word “joyful?” Presbyterians have sometimes been referred to as “the frozen chosen,” and I think for many years that title was well earned. Presbyterians in the past were not exactly known as joyful people. When you look at old photos of church people, they never seem happy.

But that's not the picture of the Christian life that we find in Scripture. In Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Joy is listed in the “Fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5. In fact, the word “joy” or “rejoice” is used more than 300 times in the Bible. If there is anything that should characterize Christians, it should be joy. As C.S. Lewis famously put it, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” I like what the great evangelist Billy Sunday once said: “If you have no joy in your religion, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere.”

We are coming to the end of what is known as Jesus' “Farewell Discourse,” his last time teaching his disciples before he is crucified. The Farewell Discourse began around the table at the end of the Last Supper and continued on the Mount of Olives. Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for what's coming. He says, “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”

As you can imagine, his disciples are confused about what he means. They say to each other, “what in the world is he talking about? A little while and you won't see me and then a little while and you will see me. And how long is ‘a little while?’” What they still don't understand is that Jesus is talking about his death and resurrection. When he says, “a little while and you will see me no longer,” he's referring to his death and burial, which will take place in just a few hours.

He's telling them that when he is crucified that they will “weep and lament.” Their sadness will be made even worse because they will see “the world” – those who oppose Jesus – rejoicing. This still happens today. The so-called “New Atheist” movement, which includes people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, wants nothing more than to see Christianity disappear. They publish books like one by Sam Harris called *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, or Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*.

But Jesus tells his disciples, and he tells us, that the sorrow and trouble will be temporary. He says, “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” He's referring to his resurrection. After being sealed in a tomb, on the third day they will see him alive again and it will change everything. Jesus isn't just saying that their sadness will go away. He's saying that the sorrow will be transformed into joy that no one can take away from them. He compares it to the difficulties and pain a woman experiences when she's pregnant. But when she holds that newborn baby, that miracle of life, she doesn't think so much about the pain and discomfort. The baby makes it worth it. That's the only reason people have more than one child.

The reason the disciples will have this kind of joy is because when Jesus is raised they will finally understand who he is and what he's done. Once the Holy Spirit works in your heart to bring you to Christ, you have that kind of deep joy that can't be taken away by the difficulties in life. Life is hard. Maybe today you have run out of joy. Your boss says they don't need you any more. Your husband wants a divorce. There isn't enough money at the end of each month. Your teenager is in that “phase” and you fight all the time. Your doctor says, “we need you to come in for more tests. You have cancer.” Knowing Jesus is so much greater than any of those things.

Jesus tells his disciples that after his resurrection they will know more fully. He says, "In that day you will ask nothing of me." The word "ask" here means to ask for an explanation. He's telling them that they will understand and not need to ask questions. They will know for certain that Jesus really is God in person. They will understand the promises Jesus made to go prepare a place for them and return to take them there some day. They will be assured to their core that they will participate in Christ's resurrection. And so will we. Romans 6 says, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall *certainly* be united with him in a resurrection like his."

According to Jesus, the secret to that kind of joy is in prayer. He says, "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 think if you made a list of the top 10 Bible verses that are abused and misused, this one would be near the top. Jesus is not saying that God will give you whatever you want if you just say "in Jesus' name amen" at the end. But there are a lot of people who try to tell you that. They call it "name-it-and-claim-it."

James Montgomery Boice said, "Much modern prayer, even by serious Christian people, is useless and ineffective because the people involved approach God thinking that he is obliged to grant their requests because of something they have themselves done for him." That would be praying in *your* name, not Christ's. What the Bible teaches is that asking in Jesus' name means coming to God based on Jesus' merit, not ours. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are not asking for what we

want, but instead asking for what Jesus would ask for if here were in our place.

To be able to pray like that is a work of the Holy Spirit. Oswald Chambers said, "The idea of prayer is not in order to get answers from God: prayer is perfect and complete oneness with God." What Jesus teaches us here is that because of his death and resurrection, because of the coming of the Holy Spirit, when we are united with Christ we now have direct access to God the Father. We don't need an intermediary to be able to talk to God. All you need is faith in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of sinners. In verse 26 he says, "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." You have the incredible privilege of being able to have a conversation with God at any time.

So what should we ask for when we pray? Rick Phillips points out that the Lord's Prayer gives us a great pattern on how we should pray. First, we pray that God's name would be glorified. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name." Next we ask that God's work would be done in the world: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus says we should pray for our needs. Not our wants but our needs. "Give us this day our daily bread." Of course our greatest need is God's forgiveness, so Jesus instructs us to ask God to "forgive us our debts, in the same way we forgive our debtors. "Finally, Jesus would have us pray for God's spiritual protection and help in resisting sin: 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'"

The disciples are beginning to understand what Jesus is telling them. They say, "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." But Jesus knows what's coming and he warns them that they will all abandon him. But the Father

will not abandon him, nor will he abandon us. You are never alone. As Jesus says, that gives us great peace.

Finally, Jesus sums up the Christian life by saying, "In the world you will have tribulation." Following Jesus puts us at odds with the sinful world. But Jesus says, "take heart; I have overcome the world." You and I will experience ups and downs in life. We will experience hard things. When you follow Jesus the world will hate you and try to silence you. But those sorrows are only temporary. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy because Jesus has overcome the world.

Amen.