

## A little while

*A little while*

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John 16:18,

18 They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith.

A little while. In this chapter, we find the Lord speaking of the most lofty and sublime truths concerning the relationships between the three persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, but he does not stay soaring into these lofty heights but, rather, condescends to men of low estate in these verses in the middle of the chapter as he comes down to minister to the needy and confused and pained hearts of his people, and we see in Christ's whole ministry this beautiful balance between describing the heights of theology and bringing it into the lives of his needy people. We'd like to look especially at how he ministers to them by the use of this phrase, "a little while." A little while. What he's saying to them basically is this: you'll have a little time of sorrow and then a long time of joy.

We'd like to look, first of all, then, at a little while of sorrow. In verse 16 he says, "A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father." Here he's bringing before them that although he is present with them, in a short time, a little while, as he says here, "ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me." I'm here, soon I'll be gone, but soon I'll be back again. And the question arises in our mind, surely, what is this referring to? Some believe it refers, of course, to his death and burial. In a short time, in a little while, I'll be out of your sight. I'll be gone. I'll be buried. I'll be entombed.

It's interesting, isn't it, that he uses phraseology here which is unusual to describe his own death. In verse 16 he says, "because I go to the Father." This is a phrase that occurs again and again in John's Gospel. Jesus uses it to describe his death. "I go to the Father." He's not saying, "I'm going to die." He's not saying, "I'm going to be crucified." He's not saying, "I'm going to be entombed," which in a sense, is very negative language but, "I go to the Father." And isn't that a beautiful way to describe his own death?

And it's also a phrase that can be used to describe the death of any Christian. When we think of a Christian dying, we shouldn't be thinking he's gone to the grave or even he's gone from the scene of time, but he has gone to the Father. That's what Christian death is. It's a going. Not only a going to God but a going home. A going to the Father.

And this is how the Lord wishes his disciples to view his own death. He's going to the Father to give an account of himself. He's going to the Father to present his blood, to carry his blood into the holy place, the blood of sacrifice. He's going to be an advocate. He's going to intercede. He's going to inherit. He's going to occupy. He's going to prepare a place for his people coming after him.

So this may refer to his death, his burial, his going to the Father in the sense of just in a few weeks he is going to leave this earth. Then also it might refer to his ascension when he was back amongst them and then just for a short time he was there before he was taken up, as the writer of Acts tells us, out of their sight. And again, this would surely fulfill this, a little while and ye shall not see me.

But whether it refers to the historical event of Christ's death in going to the Father, or his ascension to the Father, this also refers to everyday Christian experience. It's not just referring to these unique historical days of his death and ascension but it's also referring to what every Christian experiences in his daily life. Every Christian knows that this is how they experience Jesus Christ. They see him for a little while and then he's gone for a little while.

As he says here, "A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me," and so it fluctuates and oscillates between sight and absence. Why does this happen? Well, it often happens because of our own sin. We can sin away the presence of the Lord. By deliberate choices or that which offends the Lord, we can make him depart from us for a while from our sense of him and our experience of him. But also this can happen as a purely sovereign act of God not related to any particular sin nor sins but simply God decides, God chooses sovereignly, wisely, mercifully, for a time to withdraw a sense of his presence.

Whoever you are here today, if you're a Christian, you're in one of these two eras. It's either a little while of seeing him or you're going through this little while of not seeing him and if it is the little while of not seeing him, then it is time to inquire why. Is it because of my choice? If so, repentance is required. Is it because of his choice? If so, patience is required. But one thing is clear, that this little while of absence is a little while of sorrow. There are some people whom we might not see for a while and it doesn't put us up nor down, it doesn't add, it doesn't take away from life's experience, but one thing is clear: the absence of this person has the effect of deep deep sorrow and sadness.

As the disciples question amongst themselves as to what this means, he begins to explain himself in verse 19 and following. "Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me?" And he goes on really to describe this Christian experience in three ways. He describes it, first

of all, as a time of funeral grief. A time of funeral-like grief. In verse 20 he says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament." And again a few words later, "ye shall be sorrowful." Verse 22, "ye now therefore have sorrow." And he's saying this absence, this little while of his departure from them is going to be a time of deep tearing, agonizing, mourning and lamenting, and the words he uses are the words that are used to describe some of the deepest and most agonizing mournings in the culture of that day. It's basically saying, "You're going to feel like a widow and an orphan rolled into one."

Indeed, in Matthew 9, Jesus speaks in these ways, "the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?" He's saying here, "When Christ is with you, it's a time of wedding joy." Who would expect anyone to mourn on the day of a wedding? But he's saying the day is coming, not long, when that bridegroom will be taken away and then there will be a mourning and a fasting and a weeping and can there be perhaps a more painful bereavement than that, than the wife bereaved of the husband of her youth?

He's saying, "This is the kind of grief that you will experience," and indeed is this not what the disciples did experience when he was buried? What sorrow filled their hearts. How they crumbled with the weight of grief. We hear the pathos in the voices of the men on the road to Emmaus. "We thought, we thought this was he that should have redeemed Israel. All our hopes, all our joy has been dashed to pieces." We see them in all their weakness returning to their previous occupations with little enthusiasm, no doubt, because of their sorrow and their grief.

Also we see this grief in them when Christ ascended. Yes, they had the promise that he was to return but surely again there must have been a sense of loss and absence and bereavement. And again, these historical days are replicated in the Christian's everyday experience. The Christian who has know and tasted the sweetness and the joy of a wedding day with Christ. They experience a day when they wake up and he is gone. Their Beloved has withdrawn himself and is gone, and when we read, for example, the book of the Song of Solomon, we find these very pathetic words spoken by someone in a similar position, "I sought him who my soul loveth but I found him not. I sought him but I found him not. It was but a little while that I passed from them but I found him whom my soul loveth." Deep longing in the midst of this absence. Again in chapter 5, "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone: my soul failed. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer."

We often hear of young children bereaved of a brother or a sister or a father or a mother, how they can go through the house looking in the rooms where that person once was, crying out for them, calling out their name, and they find them not, and this is exactly the language that Jesus is using to describe the Christian's feelings and experiences when they lose the presence of the Lord in their lives. It's funeral grief. It's widow grief. It's orphan grief. It's the grief of the wife bereaved of the husband of her youth.

And isn't it interesting, too, you know when you weep and lament with the loss of a loved one in this world, then how many come to weep with you and how thankful you are but notice what happens here. In verse 20 he says, "ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice." Isn't that staggering? And isn't that exactly what happened when the Lord was crucified and buried out of sight, how the Romans rejoiced? How the Jews rejoiced? How the world of that day rejoiced? "Good riddance!" they were basically saying. "Glad to be rid of him! Now he and his name will disappear. Now his followers will be dispersed and the whole thing will die a death with his death."

They shall rejoice said Jesus, and rejoice they most surely did. How they celebrated as they watched him dying. How they celebrated as he died. And no doubt also at the time of the ascension when the rumors of his reappearance had begun to spread, how reassured the world would have been when they heard, "Ah, but he's gone again. This will be it finished this time. Never will we hear that preacher again or his followers again, convicting us, telling us of our errors."

The world rejoiced and again in the experience of the Christian, and there is one thing that makes the world happy is to see the Christians sad. They rejoice. They laugh while the Christian laments. When they hear of the Christian bereft and bereaved going through hard spiritual times, their hearts leap with joy. You know, there's one thing that makes the loss of the Lord more painful to the Christian, if there's one thing that deepens their grief, if there's one thing that makes their lamenting even sorer is to hear the laughter of the world at the same time.

You know the wee boy who falls and he cuts his leg and he's just trying desperately to keep in the tears and stop himself from crying, especially in front of older children perhaps, and he's just managing and he looks up and his face is creasing with the pain but he's still managing self-control in the midst of his pain, but then all the older boys start laughing at him and no longer can his heart contain itself. The heart bursts. The tears flow. Only one thing could make his pain deeper and that was their laughter. And for the Christian who has lost the sense of the Lord's presence, it's an utter agony to hear the laughter of the world. For this laughing at them or laughing at the noises that fills this world, they cannot laugh with it. They cannot rejoice with it. Indeed, the very laughter causes them agony.

I know of somebody who was under conviction of sin and they in their youth had bought a property flat in the midst of an area with lots of pubs and clubs so that they would be able to go to these places and frequent these places and get easily home and make his own place a place of partying and laughter. And so it was. But when that person came under conviction of sin, he used to lie in his bed at night in the darkness and the people that used to laugh with him were go right past his window and he was hearing their laughing and he was hearing their singing and it only made the conviction more painful and more agonizing. Isn't that the case with you?

Funeral grief, but he also compares it here to labor pain, the pain of a woman in labor. Verse 21, "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow." A woman when she is in travail

has sorrow and this is an illustration that is used frequently in Scripture to describe the experience of the chastised and afflicted Christian. For example in Isaiah 13:8, "And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames." Again later on in Isaiah, "Like as a woman with child, they at night chastening was upon them. Like as a woman with child, it draweth near the time of her delivery is in pain and crieth out in her pangs, so have we been in thy sight, O Lord." Labor pains so deep, so long, any woman in labor will tell you every minute seems like an hour; every hour seems like a day; every day seems like a week. Time lengthens.

Pain seems to expand the seconds and expand the minutes and expand the hours and Jesus is here saying, "This is what you will feel like." You will feel as if you're like that woman in travail, that woman in labor, so deep, so repetitive, so recurring will be the pains that time itself will seem to stand still and you'll wonder, "Will this ever come to an end?" And you'll even wonder, "Is this worth it?" as many woman have in the midst of it all and many have cried out, "Never again!" And Jesus is saying, "Here this is what you're going to go through, disciples."

This is how they felt in these three days, that little while of his absence. This is how they felt to some degree or other, between the time of his ascension and his coming to them by the Holy Spirit. And this is how you feel, is it not, O Christian, who has lost the presence of the Lord in your life? You feel like the pain goes on forever and it keeps coming back and you cry out as Isaiah here describes, you cry out in your pangs?

Then, thirdly, he describes it as a time, a little while of confusing questions, a time of puzzled confusion because when Jesus mentions this, we find the disciples questioning. We read in verse 17, they said among themselves, "What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith." They were expressing their ignorance, their lack of knowledge. It was a time of confusion, a time of puzzling. And no doubt this did express, this did describe their state of mind between his death and resurrection. How many questions. What a spiral of despair they must have been in. How many questions must have flooded their minds. How many puzzles. How much confusion. Just a swirling mass of question marks over everything he had said and everything he had done and all their experience. Was it all a deception? Was it all an illusion? Have we been deceived? Have we been taken in? Was it all falsehood?

How many questions they must have had, curious question, impertinent questions, ignorant questions, distrustful questions, but Christ says to them after that little while, and he's describing it in verse 23, "in that day ye shall ask me nothing." He says there's a day coming when all that confusion and all these puzzles and all these question marks will be taken away. We would like to look at that a bit next, the little while of joy. If this is your experience, Christian, if you're going through funeral grief, labor pain, and a time of great and puzzling confusion, be assured by these wonderful words that he says, "A little while,

and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me." A little while and ye shall see me.

What is he referring to here? Well, of course, first of all, to the resurrection. Secondly, he's referring to Pentecost. If the resurrection was after the little while of his being entombed, Pentecost was after the little while between the ascension and his coming to them at Pentecost between in John he makes clear that when he pours out the Holy Spirit, it's he himself that is coming to his people. He said, "I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you." And therefore, Pentecost was not only the coming of the Spirit but the coming of Christ to his people. Christ associates the coming of the Spirit with a time of revelation; a time when their knowledge of Christ would be deepened; their experience of him would be deepened; their understanding of him would be deepened.

And so Pentecost was, as he says here, "a little while and ye shall see me," and the word "see" there is different to the word "see" earlier on in the chapter. "Ye shall not see me" is a word that's used for physical sight, but the word "see" later on is used also for spiritual discernment, and so he's promising here a time of deeper, further, spiritual discernment that lies ahead. A little while and you shall see me as you've never seen me before. Experience me as you've never experienced me before. Again, is this not what the Christian often experiences after passing through a little while of absence, of loss, of bereavement, of labor pain and of confusing questions? After that little while, they see the Lord again as they have never seen him before with deeper discernment, greater appreciation, stronger faith.

And how does he describe this recovery of sight? Well, just as he described the loss of Christ as funeral grief, he describes the recovery of Christ as resurrection joy. In verse 20, "ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy." Verse 22, "now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice." What kind of joy must have filled their hearts when they saw him again after the resurrection? We are told, in fact, they couldn't believe for the joy that they had. That's a strange expression, isn't it? It's almost as if the joy was so great and overflowing there was hardly any space left in their heart for faith.

How much joy they must have had when the Holy Spirit was poured out to them. It was like another resurrection of Christ in their experience. And for the Christian who had lost the Lord, when the little while of loss is over, it's just like a resurrection in their own souls. You know, we often hear and we've maybe said it ourselves when we've lost a loved one, what we would give, what we would give to see them walk through the door again even for a minute. Can you imagine the joy that would fill your heart? This is the joy he's speaking of here. When the Lord returns to the soul, it's a million times better than the resurrection of a loved one from the dead. It's resurrection joy.

And how the soul runs to him and embraces him and welcomes him and rejoices in him as one risen from the very dead itself. He says, "I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice." Believe that, believer. You who are passing through this time of grief and pain and puzzle, he says, "I will see you again. I will visit you again. I will resurrect again in

your soul." And what will happen? Your heart shall rejoice. And notice, too, "your joy no man taketh from you." The world may rejoice when you're sad and the world may try and desire to take that joy from you when it's recovered in your soul again, but notice he says no one can take it from you. No man. No man.

John Gill said this, "Though there are many things that cause sorrow now such as sin, Satan and afflictions, yet nothing more sensibly touches believers to the quick and gives them more uneasiness than when Christ is out of sight. The reasons are because he is so nearly related to them, being their everlasting Father, kind husband, loving brother and faithful friend, and because they are so strongly affected to him, there is none like him in their esteem in heaven and on earth. He is the person whom their souls love. He is the very life of their souls. His favor, his gracious presence is life to them and his absence is as death. Nor can they be easy but are restless until he returns to them which he does in his own time. Therefore, this sorrow is but for the present, it is not perpetual."

Then again, he describes the recovery of Christ. It's not only resurrection joy but as birth joy. Verse 21, "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world." What does the mother experience? She doesn't experience the cause of the pain being taken away. The child is causing the pain. The child is not taken away and something substituted in its place. That would be no joy to the laboring mother. What causes the laboring mother's joy? It's that the very cause of the pain is transformed into a cause of joy. The very thing that caused the pain is the thing that causes the joy. The Lord does not deal with this mother by substitution but transformation and so it is for the Christian who sees the death of Christ, the thing that causes pain to the Christian, that their sins crucified the Lord of glory, is the very thing that the Lord transforms into a source of joy and, therefore, we can say in the Christian's own experience, this absence, this loss, this pain, God can transform it into itself eventually being a cause of joy and delight.

Again, there are many promises in Scripture like this. In Job 11, "Because thou shalt forget thy misery and remember it as waters that pass away." Genesis 41, "Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house." And the Lord can make this to happen in your own life, too, Christian. The joy of the birth wipes out the pain of the labor and, oh, what joy fills the Christian's heart when the Lord reappears. It's greater joy than the birth of a firstborn child, is it not?

Birth joy and all the multiplied questions answered. "In that day," he says, "you shall ask me nothing." All the questions answered. All the puzzles with solutions. All the confusion made clear. He's not promising them clarity now but later. After that little while of confusion, he says, clarity. And there is no doubt this was partly fulfilled when he rose from the dead. Then they understood so much more. At the time of Pentecost, again there was a great answering of many questions. And for the Christian, too, these times of grief and sorrow and pain and loss, after a little while, all this made clear. We understand, although the full solution, the final answers remain after a little while here in

this world because here is where, surely, this is ultimately fulfilled, at the end, the very end of our time in this world which in the life of eternity is a little while. At times it feels so long but we have to believe the Lord when he says it's a little while.

It's a little while. "How can you say that, Lord?" Well, because it's a little while compared with the many times of joy that you have had in this world. A month of loss, two years of absence, oh, it's painful and agony but think of the years and years you've had of the Lord's favor and delight. This absence is a little while compared to that. Think on that. It's a little while compared with what you deserve. Who of us deserves to taste and see that the Lord is good? Who of us deserves to have the Lord in our hearts, never mind feel that he is in our hearts?

And this time of absence is a little while compared with what the ungodly and the Christ-less will experience in eternity because we're told here though the world shall rejoice at your sorrow, they will have grief in the future. When your hearts shall rejoice, their joy shall be turned into sorrow. And just as your griefs will be made a cause of joy perhaps in this world, certainly in the world to come, so the joys of this world, the joys of the ungodly in this world, will themselves be turned into the source of grief and pain and agony for all eternity. The same things that cause you joy and laughter and comfort in this world if you're godless and Christ-less, are the very things that will torture and torment and trouble you for all eternity.

But for the believer, oh, what lies ahead. Their joys will be increased and their sorrows will be turned into joy. Keep in mind this little phrase, "a little while." A little while. A little while for his anger endureth how long? But a moment and his favor is life. Weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning. For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee. For our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, for yet a little while and he that shall come will come and will not tarry. For yet a little while, and then the wicked shall not be. His place thou shalt consider well, but it thou shalt not see. A little while. A little while. A little while.

Let's pray.

*O Lord our God, what is it about the Christian's afflictions which make the days and the years seem so long? We pray that thou wouldst help us to relabel these long days, a little while. And oh, we pray thou it be a little while, that it would soon be over and we would see thee again personally, congregationally, and nationally. O come, Lord Jesus. Amen.*