

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Easter; John 16:16-23 (3rd sermon)

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil.

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I. CHRIST'S PASSION AND RESURRECTION

1. This Gospel contains, and likewise pictures for us, the high and excellent work God accomplished when Christ, His only Son, died and rose again from the dead for us. Much has been said on this theme and there is much more to say. As for myself, I find that the more I study it, the less I master it. But since it is God's will that we think of him, praise his work and grace, and thank him for the same, it is proper that we speak and hear all we can about them.

2. The Lord addresses his disciples here in dark and veiled words, which they do not understand; chiefly, no doubt, because he wishes thus to admonish them and thoroughly impress these words, so seldom heard, upon them, that they may not forget. A deeper impression is made upon one by words that are seldom used than by the forms of speech in general use.

3. The result was that the disciples even repeated the words twice and asked one another what they must mean. Christ likewise repeated them, and no less than four times. Still they remained dark and unintelligible words to them until later he revealed their meaning, when he rose from the dead and bestowed upon the disciples the Holy Spirit. Then they clearly understood his words. So we now understand them, to the extent that we hear and read them; but that they should be understood to their depth, that will not be in this life. But as I said, the longer and the more one learns from them, the less one can, and the more one must, learn.

4. For the Word of God is a different government, and the Holy Scriptures a different book, from the discourses and writings of man. St. Gregory spoke truly when he uttered the fine proverb: The Scriptures are a river in which a large elephant must swim and across which a little lamb can wade on foot. For the Scriptures speak clearly and plainly enough to the common people, but to the wise and very learned they are unattainable. As St. Paul confesses concerning himself in Phil 3, 15.

5. And St. Peter says in I Pet 1, 12 that such things were announced and written in the Scriptures that even the angels have their satisfaction and enough to occupy them, in the great work that Christ, God's Son, became man, suffered death on the cross, but rose again and sits now at the right hand of the Father, Lord over all, even according to his human nature, and governs and preserves his church against Satan's wrath and all the power of the world. We have, it is true, the words treating of this, but the angels see and understand it and therein have their eternal joy. And as they in eternity cannot behold it enough, much less can we understand it, for it is a work that is eternal, inexpressible, immeasurable and inexhaustible.

6. This is said de cognitione objectiva; that is, as one sees it at a glance, as the angels view it, and as we will see it in the life beyond. But in this life we must have a different understanding of it, a practical knowledge (cognitio practica), that we may learn to confess what the power of this work is and what it can do. This is done by faith, which must cease in the next life, where we also shall know it by a full vision of it.

II. THE COMFORT CHRIST MINISTERS TO HIS DISCIPLES IN THEIR SORROW, AND THE JOY OF THE WORLD.

A. The Sorrow Of The Disciples And The joy Of The World.

7. We must learn here now what it is that the Lord says: "A little while, and ye behold me not; and again a little while and ye shall see me," etc. This passage is fraught with as much meaning as that other: "Ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice," etc. "But your sorrow shall be turned into joy." A rare saying: A little while not see and be sorrowful, and yet a little while again see and be joyful.

8. According to the letter and history, it is indeed easy to understand what these words mean, especially in our day. In the confession of our faith even the children say: "I believe in Jesus Christ," etc; "was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose again from the dead." These are the two "little whiles," of which Christ here speaks. But since there is deception where we also seek, and taste it, and we should try to bring it into life or experience, the words have a wonderful depth of meaning--that we should lose Christ, whom we believe to be God's Son, who died and rose for us, etc; that he should die in us, as the apostles experienced until the third day. A terrible crucifixion and death begin when Christ dies in us and we also in him. As he here says: Ye shall not see me, for I am to depart from you. That is, I die, hence ye also will die, in that ye will not see me; and thus I will be dead to you and you will be dead to me. This is a special, deep and severe sorrow.

9. As there are many kinds of joy, so there are many kinds of sorrow. As, for example, when one is robbed of his money and property, or is reviled and disgraced when innocent, or loses father and mother, child and dear friends, etc; likewise, when Satan afflicts and martyrs one's soul with sad thoughts, as Satan so easily can, though one knows not why or whence. But the really great sorrow above all sorrow is for the heart to lose Christ, so that he is no longer in view and there is no hope of further comfort from him. There are few who are so sorely tried. Surely not all even of his disciples experienced this. Perhaps not St. Thomas, St. Andrew, St. Bartholomew, and others, who were such good, common and plain people. But the other tender hearts, St. Peter, St. John, St. Philip and others, to whom these words applied, as they all had heard that they would lose Christ and never see him again.

10. Christ here also addresses, more than others, persons who truly believe and experience that Christ died and afterwards rose again; and it is to them a little while, in a common, small and childish sense, and only a bodily sorrow. But the disciples had to keenly feel and experience what it is to lose Christ out of view, not only to have him taken away bodily, but also spiritually, leaving them in a twofold misery and sorrow. For they had had not only the joy of his bodily presence, in that he was so long with them, cared for them, ate and drank with them, and passed through loving, sweet customs and fellowship, but he had associated so affectionately with them and had borne their weaknesses, yea, companioned with them more intimately and lovingly than a father does with his children. He often gave them remarkable liberties and even animated them by innocent trivialities. Therefore, they were pained to lose such a companionable Lord,

11. But the chief cause of their sorrow lay in the fact that they had set their hearts on his becoming a mighty lord and king and founding a government by which he would make them, along with himself, lords. They thought he would never suffer them to die. Such was hitherto their hearts' joy and confidence in this Saviour.

12. Now, however, they lose both utterly and at one time, not only the friendly companionship of the Lord, but also this beautiful, glorious confidence, and they suddenly fall into the abyss of hell and eternal sorrow, Their Lord is most shamefully put to death, and they must now expect every moment, because of him, to be seized in like manner. They must now sing this song of mourning: Alas, how our confidence is now totally lost! We hoped to become great lords through this man and possess every joy we desired. Now he lies in the grave and we are fallen into the hands of Caiaphas and Judas, and there are no more miserable and unhappy people on the earth than we.

13. Notice, this is the true sorrow and heart agony, of which Christ here is really speaking, into which God does

not lead everyone, nor anyone so readily; for here he offers comfort against it, as he shows in this Gospel. Other bodily suffering and need may be considered sorrow, as, when one suffers persecution, imprisonment and misery for Christ's sake, and loses his property, honour and even his life. But the greatest of all sorrows is to lose Christ. Then all comfort is gone and all joy is at an end and neither heaven nor sun and moon, neither angel nor any other creature, can help you; nay not even God himself. For besides this Saviour, Christ, there is none in heaven nor on earth. Now, when he has departed, all salvation and comfort are gone, and Satan has gained an opportunity to plague and terrify the troubled soul. This he desires to do in the name and person of God, as he can then play the part of a lord.

14. On the other hand, the highest of all joy is that which the heart has in Christ, our Saviour. That is, indeed, also called joy, when one rejoices over the possession of great fortune, money and property, power, honour, etc.; but all this is but the joy of a child or of a maniac. There is also the infamous joy of Satan which even rejoices over the injury and misfortune of others, of which Christ here also says: The world will rejoice, and laugh in its sleeve over your crying and weeping when they put me to death and cause you every misfortune. There are also many like these in worldly affairs, who can never be happy unless they have brought misfortune to their neighbour or have seen him meet it. They are like the poisonous reptile, the Salamander, which (as the fable runs) is so cold that it can live in fire or can exist out of fire. So these people live and grow fat on the misfortunes of other people. The nice, envious person who is sad when another prospers, and would gladly have one eye less if thereby his neighbour had none, is the product of Satan.

15. But all this is still nothing compared with the joy the world, ruled by Satan, has in opposing Christ and his followers. It rejoices the most over the great misfortune of his followers in that Christ is crucified, all the apostles are banished, the church is completely destroyed, God's Word is silenced and his name totally blotted out. This is spiritual joy just as truly as the severe sorrow is spiritual. However, it is not from the Holy Spirit, but from those who belong, body and soul, to Satan, and still are called the wisest, the most learned and the holiest persons upon the earth. They are like the high priests, Pharisees and scribes, who have no peace and know no joy so long as they hear the name of Christ mentioned and know that his Word is preached, or see one of his disciples still alive. As they say, in the Wisdom of Solomon 2.15: "He is grievous unto us even to hear or to behold," and while Christ hangs on the cross, they blaspheme and revile in great joy thus: "If thou art the Son of God, and the King of Israel, come down from the cross; he trusteth on God, let him deliver him now," etc. Mt 27,40-43. See how their hearts leap with joy, what a paradise and kingdom of heaven they have in seeing the dear Lord reviled on the cross and put to death; and that they themselves did it, is to them nothing but sugar and sweet grapes.

16. Observe, Christ here gives such joy to the world, and on the other hand severe sorrow to his disciples in that they must see, hear and suffer this. It must penetrate through their hearts, through their bodies and lives. And he truly pictures the world here to be as terrible and horrible as a child of Satan that has no greater joy than to see Christ defeated and his followers shamefully condemned and lost.

17. We see almost this condition now in our clever noblemen, the pope, the bishops and their rabble; how they maliciously rejoice and shout when they discover it goes a little ill with us, and how anxious they are that it under no circumstances remains concealed. It must be trumpeted forth until it reaches the abyss of hell. Dear God, what have we done to them? They still have their property and money, power and luxury, while we have hardly our daily bread. It is not enough that they are superior to us in everything they crave, while we are in other ways harassed and afflicted but they must besides be such bitter enemies to us that they do not wish us God's grace but would have us burned in the lowest fires of perdition!

18. It is always a horrible sight, and the true fruit of the infernal spirit, that people cannot rejoice so highly over the good nor over worldly or human joy. Yea, no gold nor silver they love so intensely, no stringed instrument sounds so sweet to them, no drink tastes so good as to yield them the joy they feel when they see the fall and grief of pious Christians. They are so inflamed by hatred and a desire of revenge that they enjoy no really happy moment until they are able to sing: Praise be to God, the villains are at last out of the way! We have now rooted the Gospel out of the country. They have no rest and taste no joy before they have brought this about. Heretofore

they have sought and partly accomplished this by many prompt intrigues, tricks and ill offices, and God allowed some to have for a short time a little joy, which individuals contrived and arranged. But they by no means tooled their anger in this way, as they had desired to do.

B. The Comfort Christ Ministers To His Disciples.

19. Hence, Christ wishes to say here: You have now heard both what kind of joy the world will have, and what kind of sorrow will be yours. Therefore, learn it and cleave to it when you meet and experience it, so that you may have patience and lay hold of true comfort in the midst of such suffering. I must try you thus and let you taste what it means to lose me and for me to die in your hearts, in order that you may learn to understand this mystery and secret; for you will otherwise not study me. It will be too great for you to serve your time of apprenticeship in this exalted work, that God's Son returns to the Father, that is, that he dies and rises again for you, to bring you to heaven. And if I do not allow you to be tried for a time, you will remain too imprudent and finally be incapable of doing right.

20. Therefore, he says, you must adapt and resign yourself to this, so as to experience what this "little while" means, and yet not despair and be wrecked therein. And therefore I tell you before, that it must be so. You have to pass through such sorrow inwardly and outwardly, that is, both in body and soul; but when it takes place and the hour comes that you have nothing to comfort you, and you have lost both me and God, then hold fast still to my Word that I now speak to you. It is only a matter of a little while. Now, if you can learn this saying, and retain these small words, "a little while," and "again a little while," there will be no trouble.

21. True, the first "little while" that you now see me and still have me with you, until I depart from you--that you can suffer and pass through. But the other "little while," until you shall see me again--that will be an especially long and hard time for you. For it is the hour of true sorrow, when I will be to you dead, with all the joy, comfort and assurance you had from me, and you yourselves will be totally lost. However, my dear little children, only think of these words and forget not entirely what I now say to you. It shall not be so forever. A little while I shall be lost and not be seen. This you must now learn by experience. But only retain this much, that I called it "a little while," and in my eyes it is only a little, short hour, although in your hearts and feelings it is not a little but a long while; yea, an eternally long while and a long eternal while. According to your feelings you will not be able to think differently, for when I am taken from you, you have lost all, since I am the eternal good and the eternal consolation. When that is gone, there is no longer a little while, nothing but the eternal; namely, eternal sorrow and death.

22. Notice, Christ preaches here for the comfort of his disciples and of all Christians when tempted thus by God, whether it takes place inwardly or outwardly, bodily or spiritually, especially in the highest form, which is called losing Christ out of the heart; that they may learn this passage, and retain this drop of the lavender water, by which to refresh and strengthen their hearts. Christ, my Lord, has surely said it shall be only a little while. Although I now lose him and know of no joy whatever, but lie prostrate and languish in pure sorrow, yet I will use that drop and cling to the cordial that he shall not continue to be lost to me. He says that it shall be only a little, short season, although it appears to me indeed to be great, long, and eternal. He will come again, as he here and in John 14, 18 says: "I will not leave you orphans; I come unto you," etc. And thus we shall possess in him eternal comfort and joy instead of this little season of sorrow.

23. On the other hand, Christ says further that you must endure it that the world rejoices over your suffering and sorrow, for which it has no reason except that of pure satanic jealousy, by which it is so completely blinded. embittered and exasperated that no joy relieves it until its jealousy sees you stumble and become ruined. This is its heart's delight and pleasure and it esteems it a heavenly, eternal joy. Then it says: Let us now see whether God will save him; is he the Son of God, then let him come down from the cross, etc. Mk 15, 31-32. As if they should say: He is now out of the way, and we are done with him forever.

24. But notice what further follows. Just as you, he says, shall not be robbed of a view of me forever, nor remain in your sorrow, so they shall not rejoice over your misfortune forever; but it shall be for them also only a short

season, and be, as they say, a dance at high mass. For I will soon come to you again and make it worse and more bitter for them than it has ever been before. This was fulfilled in them after Christ's resurrection, so that the Jews have no severer suffering than that they must hear and see Christ, our Lord. Although it pleases them a little that they slander Christ and his mother Mary and us Christians in the most ignominious manner, yet true joy they can never possess as they desire. And they continually hope that their Messiah will come and uproot all Christians.

25. Thus, also, our Caiaphas and Judas, the pope, with all his factions, who continually console themselves with the hope that we shall yet be uprooted cannot be happy while we live and the Gospel spreads. Nothing that causes man to rejoice has any effect upon them. Some are so angry that they cannot cease their raging and roaring until we all are dead. When that takes place they will be once happy, but the joy for which they long shall never be theirs. For, although we are dead, the Gospel will still remain and others will take our places, and that will be to them a new heart agony.

26. The Turk likewise imagines he will exterminate Christ and enthrone his Mohammed in all the world, and he rejoices whenever there is any hope of doing so; but this joy he craves he shall never experience. Our Lord, whom the Turk himself highly exalts and must esteem as a great prophet, shall restrain him; yea, finally season his joy and make it bitter enough through the exalted work of his death and resurrection, by which he tramples under foot sin, death and Satan. The victory which God accomplished through Christ was long before announced in the Scriptures, whereupon the beloved prophets and fathers died in this joy, as Christ says of Abraham in John 8, 56.

27. Since Abraham received such joy before it had yet transpired, but was only in word and promise, how much more can and will he receive it in the future after it has transpired and is proclaimed in the earth and even in heaven by the angels! Neither pope nor Turk can smother and extinguish it. They may indeed try to smother it, and fancy they have a bite of sugar when they do Christendom a little harm; but they shall never obtain the joy they hope for and for which they thirst.

28. They may rejoice for a season, Christ says, but not longer than while you are in sorrow. That joy is particularly short, as your sorrow is short and lasts only a little while, and shall soon be turned into joy that no one will take from you. Without doubt that joy will, on the other hand, be also turned into sorrow that will never end.

29. Here upon the earth, however, you will not be able to have enough joy, nor will it be of the true, perfect quality that will quench your thirst. Only a foretaste, an appetizing morsel or a refreshing sip. It is too great ever to be exhausted as also the work that develops this joy is far too great to be fathomed by our learning. God mingles and tempers things thus upon the earth so that those who should by right rejoice must experience great suffering and sorrow; and, on the other hand, those who should be sorrowful here are happy and have a good time, but still in a way that this outward joy works their ruin. For they cannot acquire the true inner joy they long for, therefore their outer joy will also be their destruction. Their wealth, power, honour, pleasure and high living by no means make them happy, and they cannot lay their heads down to rest until they see that Christ is dead and his disciples are banished from the earth. These are always poor, miserable people whom one may truly pity. They fare the worst in that they cannot have their temporal joy pure, as they desire, because of their jealousy and hatred; and we even are altogether too ready to take vengeance by doing them harm. What more misfortune can they have and what greater injury can they do themselves than that they themselves should spoil and annihilate their own joy?

30. We also have true sorrow, both outwardly and inwardly, when Christ conceals himself from us; not like them, moved by jealousy and hatred, but because we do not possess Christ, the chief good. For this, however, there is already mingled with the sorrow the sugar that Christ speaks. Beloved, only persevere a little. It shall not be eternal, but short-lived sorrow, and soon it will be better. It is only a matter of a little while.

31. These words I hear, but when sorrow comes, it is stamped so deeply in the heart that I do not feel this comfort, and I fancy that it is impossible for the sorrow to have an end. However, this comfort keeps me, so that

I do not fall from Christ to the other party. Though I experience grief and need, still they keep me, so that the sorrow must not be thoroughly bitter. As in the case of the others, their joy is sweetened and sugared through and through, yet it is always spoiled by wormwood and gall, so in our case sorrow has within itself its sugar and honey.

32. Therefore, let us continue to hear Christ and learn to understand his language, that we judge not according to our feelings, as if comfort were lost forever and sorrow had no end. That you feel and think thus, he says, I know very well; but still listen to what I say to you and learn only this word modicum, a little while. Sorrow must also be felt, but it shall not harm you, besides it shall not last long. Even by this the sorrow is already sugar-coated and tempered. Later, when the "little while" has passed and triumphed, then one feels what Christ says: "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy." Then the true joy of the heart commences and the soul sings an eternal Hallelujah, and Christ is Risen--a joy which will in the life beyond be perfect, without a defect and without an end.

33. Notice that the articles of our faith, both on the death and the resurrection of Christ, are thus set before us in this Gospel, and how the same must be put to practice by us, learned, and exercised in our deeds and our experiences, and not only heard with the ears and spoken with the mouth. Also, that we thus feel it, and such power works in us that both body and soul thereby become changed; that is, Christ dies in us and we also die in him. That is a great change, from life to death. However, then I must cleave firmly by faith to the words Christ says, "A little while," and not only hear, but also take to heart the truth that trial will not last forever, but there will be a change from death to life when Christ again rises and lives in me and I become alive in him. Then the words shall come true, "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one taketh away from you," etc. For this meeting every Christian should be prepared whenever he is called for it; for he must experience something of it either in life or at the hour of death; so that he will then be reminded of this saying of Christ and let nothing tear this comfort out of his heart. Amen.

34. Whatever is to be said further on this Gospel in a textual exposition of it you can read in the explanation of the three chapters of John, the discourses Christ spoke at the Last Supper to his disciples, where this and the Gospel for the following Sunday are treated at length.

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