

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
16:16-24

16. 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. 17. Then *some* of his disciples said among themselves, What is this that he says to 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? 18. They therefore said, What is this that he says, A little while? We cannot tell what he is saying. 19. Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask him, and said to them, Do ye inquire among yourselves about what I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again a little while, and ye shall see me? 20. Verily, verily I say to you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. 21. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. 22. And ye now therefore have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man will take from you. 23. And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily I say to you, whatever ye shall ask the Father in my name he will give you. 24. Until now ye have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.

16.--[*A little while, etc.*] There is a difficulty in this verse which requires consideration. To what time does our Lord refer when He says, "a little while and ye shall not see Me," and "ye shall see Me?" There are two answers.

(a) Some think, as Chrysostom, Cyril, and Hengstenberg, that our Lord only meant, "In a few hours I shall be removed by death, and buried, and then you will not see Me; and again after three days I shall rise again, and then you will see Me."

(b) Others think, as Augustine, Maldonatus, and Wordsworth, that our Lord meant, "In a short time I shall leave the world, ascend up to heaven, and go to my Father, and you will see Me no more; and again, in comparatively short time, I shall return to the world at my second advent, and you will see Me again."

I decidedly prefer the second of these interpretations. To explain the phrases "Ye shall not see Me" and "Ye shall see Me" by our Lord's death and resurrection, seems to me a forced and unnatural interpretation. Moreover, it completely fails to explain the words "I go to the Father." Both here and all through the passage, I believe our Lord is speaking for the benefit of the whole Church until His coming again, and not merely for the benefit of the eleven apostles. The true sense is best seen by inverting the order of the words. "The time has arrived when I must leave the world and go back again to my Father. The consequence is that in a little time you will

no longer see Me with your bodily eyes, for I shall be in heaven and you on earth. But take comfort! In a little time I shall return again with power and great glory, and then you and all my believing people will see Me again."

It is worth notice, in support of the view I maintain, that the expression in Greek, "a little while," is almost the same as in Heb. 10:37, when the second advent is clearly spoken of. Moreover, the expression "I go" is distinctly applied in several places to our Lord's final departure from the world and seldom, if ever, to our Lord's death on the cross.

Alford thinks His meaning is manifold, and says: "'Ye shall see Me' began to be fulfilled at the resurrection, then received its main fulfillment at Pentecost, and shall have its final fulfillment at the return of our Lord." This strikes me as a very untenable view.

It is curious that the first "Ye shall see" is in the present tense, and is an entirely different word to the second, which is a future. The first would be rendered literally, "Ye behold, or gaze upon Me!"

17.--[*Then some of his disciples said, etc.*] This whole verse shows how little the disciples realized or understood our Lord's meaning at present, when He spoke of His second advent. Yet when we consider how widely different are the meanings put on our Lord's words by Christians in *this* day, we can hardly feel surprised that eleven weak believers, like the apostles, could not take in the full sense of the words when they first heard them the night before the crucifixion.

18.--[*They therefore said...a little while.*] This sentence shows that it was the "time" mentioned--"a little while"--which perplexed the disciples. We may conjecture that they could not make out whether it literally meant a few days or hours or figuratively meant a comparatively short time. And is not this precisely the point on which all students of unfulfilled prophecy disagree? The verse before us is curiously applicable to many a prophetic controversy.

[*We cannot tell, etc.*] The words would be more literally rendered, "We do not know what he is speaking of."

19.--[*Now Jesus knew...ask Him.*] Here, as in other places, our Lord's perfect knowledge of the hearts and thoughts of all around Him is pointed out. The word "ask," we should carefully note, is literally "to ask questions about a thing." It is the same word that is used in verse 23, "at that day ye shall ask Me nothing."

[*And said, etc.*] The phrase rendered, "Do ye inquire among yourselves of that?" would be more literally, "Concerning this, do ye seek with each other?"

20.--[*Verily...say to you.*] It should be observed in this verse that our Lord gives no reply to the inquiry of the disciples. He does not tell them what He meant by saying "a little while." Questions about times and dates are rarely answered in Scripture. Our attention is rather turned to

practical things.

[*Ye shall weep and lament, etc.*] I believe, with Augustine and Bede, that the whole verse is meant to be a general description of the state of things between the first and second advents of Christ. "During my absence from the world after my ascension, you, my beloved disciples, and believers after you, shall have many reasons to lament and mourn (like a bride separated from her husband), while the wicked world around you shall rejoice in my absence and not wish to see Me return. During this long weary interval, you and all believers after you shall often have sorrow and tribulation. But at last, when I come again, your sorrow shall be turned into joy." In support of this view I advise the reader to study Matt. 9:15. The idea in each place seems the same. (Compare also Is. 65:14.)

Poole remarks: "The time of this life is the worldling's hour, while it is for the most part the power of darkness to all who love and fear God. But as the worldling's joy shall at last be turned into sorrow, so the godly man's sorrow shall be turned into joy." (Is. 50:11, Matt. 25:23.)

The interpretation of Chrysostom, Cyril, and others, which makes the whole verse fulfilled by the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, appears to me very unsatisfactory. It hardly affords time for the weeping and rejoicing which is here described. Nor is it quite clear that the day during which our Lord lay in the grave was a day of rejoicing to His enemies, if we may judge their anxiety to prevent, if possible, His resurrection from the dead.

21.--[*A woman, etc.*] This verse is an illustration of the whole state of the Church between the first and second advents of Christ. It was to be a time of pain, anxiety, and desire for deliverance, from which the only cessation would be at the personal return of Christ.

We are distinctly told in Romans 8:22 that "the whole creation groans and travails in pain until now." It is the normal state of things while Christ is absent. The second coming of the second Adam can alone restore joy to the world. The Church in Rev. 7:2 is compared to a woman "laboring in birth, and pained to be delivered." The wars and disturbances of the world are called in Matt. 24:8 the beginning of "sorrows;" and the word "sorrows" there means literally "the pains of a woman in labor."

The whole idea of the verse seems to be that the interval between Christ's first and second advent will be, to the Church, a period of pain, sorrow, and anxiety, like the state of a woman expecting her delivery; that the end of this period will be the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ the second time; and that when our Lord does come the second time, the joy of the true Church will be so great that the former sorrow and tribulation will be comparatively forgotten. The joy of seeing Christ will swallow up the afflictions of His absence. (Compare Rom. 8:18-22 and 2 Cor. 4:17.)

22.--[*And ye now therefore, etc.*] I apply to this verse the same principle of interpretation that I have applied to the preceding ones. I think our Lord is speaking of the sorrow and pain that believers would feel during the interval between His first and second advent. "You are now entering on

a period of pain, sorrow, and tribulation. But fear not. It shall not be forever. I will return and see you again. In that day your heart shall be filled and satisfied with joy--a joy that no one can ever take from you, a joy that shall be forever."

I cannot bring myself to believe that this "see you again" can possibly refer to the short period of forty days between the resurrection and the ascension! Above all, I feel strongly that the words, "Your joy no man takes from you," could certainly not be applied to the times of trouble and tribulation and persecution even unto death, which the primitive Church passed through in the beginning of its existence. The sensible joy of the primitive Church, beyond doubt, was often taken away, as when Stephen was martyred, James slain with the sword, and Peter put in prison. The second coming of Christ is the only time of universal and unbroken joy to which believers can look forward. Now we are in the wilderness and our sorrowless home is yet to be reached. Then, and then only, will tears be wiped from all eyes.

23.--[*And in that day...ask me nothing.*] In the first part of this verse I believe, with Augustine, that the "day" spoken of is the day of our Lord's second advent. The "asking" is asking questions, or making inquiries, such as the disciples had wanted to make in verse 19. "They were desirous to ask Him." The Greek word is the same, and quite different from the word rendered "ask" in the latter part of this verse. The meaning of the sentence is: "In the day of my second advent, you will not need to ask Me any questions. You will then fully understand the meaning of many things that you do not understand now." The far superior light, which believers will enjoy in the day of Christ's second coming, is the chief point of the promise, as in 1 Cor. 13:12.

Cyril and Chrysostom, however, apply "that day" to our Lord's resurrection and the forty days following it.

[*Verily...whatever...ask...give you.*] In this portion of the verse our Lord renews and repeats His former promise about prayer. "Until that day when I come again, I solemnly declare that whatever things you shall ask in prayer from the Father in my name, He will give them to you."

The word "ask" in the Greek, in the latter part of this verse, is entirely different from the word rendered "ask" in the former part. Here it signifies seeking or petitioning in prayer. There it meant asking questions.

It is worth noticing here how very frequent and full are the encouragements to prayer which our Lord holds out in the Gospels.

The "whatever" of the text must, of course, be limited to whatever things are really for God's glory, the disciples' good, and the interests of Christ's cause in the world.

24.--[*Until now...nothing in my name.*] This sentence means that up to this time the disciples had not prayed for anything through the name and mediation of Christ. They had followed Him as a teacher, looked up to Him

as a Master, loved Him as a friend, believed Him as the Messiah predicted by the prophets. But they had not fully realized that He was the one Mediator between God and man, through whom alone God's mercy could come down to sinners, and sinful creatures could draw near to God. They were now to learn that their Master was one far higher than any prophet, yes, even than Moses himself.

Daniel's prayer, "Shine on Thy sanctuary for the Lord's sake," is almost the only instance of a prayer in Messiah's name in the Old Testament. (Dan. 9:17.)

[*Ask...receive...joy may be full.*] This sentence means: "From henceforth, begin the practice of asking everything in my name and through my mediation. Ask fully and confidently, and you shall receive fully and abundantly. So asking, you shall find the joy and comfort of your own souls enlarged and filled up."

John Gerhard here remarks: "The benefit of prayer is so great that it cannot be expressed! Prayer is the dove, which when sent out returns again, bringing with it the olive leaf, namely peace of heart. Prayer is the golden chain, which God holds fast and lets not go until He blesses. Prayer is Moses' rod, which brings forth the water of consolation out of the rock of salvation. Prayer is Samson's jawbone, which smites down our enemies. Prayer is David's harp, before which the evil spirit flies. Prayer is the key to Heaven's treasures."

The Greek word rendered "full" means literally "filled up," being the perfect participle of the verb "to fill or fulfill."

The sentence teaches us that the joy and happiness of believers admit of degrees, and may be fuller at one time than at another. It also teaches that the joy of a believer depends much on his fervency and earnestness in prayer. He who prays little and coldly must not expect to know much of "joy and peace in believing."

We should not fail to observe how prayer is here set before believers as a plain duty, in the imperative mood, and also how desirous our Lord is that His people should be rejoicing Christians even now in the midst of a bad world. That religion which makes people melancholy and miserable and wretched looking, is a very low type of Christianity, and far below the standard of Him who wished "joy to be full." (Compare 1 John 1:4.)