

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 21: The Promise of the Holy Spirit

John 16:1-33

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 16 continues the upper room discourse and is the fullest teaching on the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. The teacher must handle the Spirit promises with the same care as in Lessons 19 and 20, and this is where the issue comes to a head. Doctrinally, the chapter teaches that it was to the disciples' advantage for Jesus to go so the Spirit could come, that the Spirit convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, that the Spirit would guide the apostles into all the truth and glorify Christ, and that sorrow would turn to resurrection joy. The climactic promise is "I have overcome the world." The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, which directly addresses the misuse of these promises to claim modern new revelation and miraculous sign gifts.

The crucial doctrinal point: the promise that the Spirit would guide "into all the truth" (v. 13) was made specifically to the apostles and was fulfilled in the inspired teaching of the New Testament. The teacher should help students see that the Spirit's work of revealing new truth was completed in the apostolic age and is preserved in the completed Scriptures, so we do not look for new revelations or continuing sign gifts today (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3). At the same time, the Spirit genuinely works in believers now, convicting, helping, and sanctifying through the truth He has revealed.

At the same time, the chapter is deeply pastoral, honest about coming sorrow and tribulation, yet anchoring believers in the promise of joy and Christ's victory. So aim at both: a sound understanding of the Spirit's work and the completeness of the apostolic revelation, and a heart prepared to face a hard world with Christ's peace and overcoming victory. The disciple we are forming rests in the Spirit's work and in Christ who has overcome the world.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you" (v. 7). Why was it actually better for the disciples that Jesus go and send the Spirit, and what does this teach about the Spirit's role?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus says something that must have stunned the grieving disciples: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to

you” (v. 7). His departure, far from being pure loss, would open the way for the coming of the Spirit.

Draw out why it was better. While Jesus walked the earth in His physical body, He was present in one place at a time. Through the Spirit, He would be present with and within all His people everywhere, at once. The Spirit’s coming meant a new and more intimate presence of God with His people, no longer beside them only but within them.

Connect this to Pentecost. The promise was fulfilled when the Spirit was poured out (Acts 2). From then on, the people of God would be indwelt and empowered by the Spirit. This is part of the new and better arrangement of the New Covenant, the abiding presence of God within His people.

Apply it. Help students grasp that the Spirit’s presence is not a lesser substitute for Jesus but the way the risen Christ is present with them now. They are not at a disadvantage compared to those who walked with Jesus in Galilee; they have the indwelling Spirit. Ask students how a deeper awareness of the Spirit’s presence might change the way they live.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The advantage of Jesus’ departure: the coming of the Spirit (John 16:7).
- The Spirit as the new, intimate, indwelling presence of God with His people.
- The fulfillment of the promise at Pentecost (Acts 2).
- The indwelling Spirit as a mark of the New Covenant.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was it better for the disciples that Jesus go and send the Spirit?
- What does this teach about the Spirit’s role?
- How might awareness of the Spirit’s presence change your daily life?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus warned that hard times were coming so that they would “not fall away” (vv. 1–4). How does being honestly prepared for difficulty help guard our faith, and where do you need to brace yourself with truth for a hard season?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus prepares His disciples honestly for hardship: “They will put you out of the synagogues... I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you” (vv. 2, 4). He forewarns them so that the coming trouble will not destroy their faith but find them prepared.

Draw out the value of being forewarned. Jesus does not spare His disciples the truth about coming persecution; He tells them in advance precisely so that, when it comes, they will not be caught off guard and will not “fall away” (v. 1). Trouble that we have been prepared for is far less likely to shipwreck our faith than trouble that ambushes us.

Apply the principle. Much of the danger in hardship comes from the false expectation that following Christ should be easy or trouble-free. When suffering comes to those who expected ease, they can conclude that God has failed or that faith does not work. Being braced with the truth, that following Christ includes hardship, guards us against this.

Press for specifics. Ask students where they need to brace themselves with truth for a hard season, perhaps an anticipated difficulty, a likely opposition, a trial they sense coming. Help them prepare now, anchoring in Christ's words, so that when the hour comes they remember He told them and stand firm rather than fall away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forewarning as a guard against falling away (John 16:1–4).
- The danger of false expectations of an easy Christian life.
- Truth bracing us against the shock of hardship.
- Preparing in advance to stand firm in trial.

Discussion Prompts

- How does being prepared for difficulty help guard our faith?
- Where have false expectations of ease made trouble harder?
- Where do you need to brace yourself with truth for a hard season?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus said the Spirit would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (vv. 8–11). What is the Spirit’s convicting work, and how is it a necessary mercy rather than something to resent?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus describes one aspect of the Spirit’s work: “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (v. 8). The Spirit works in the world to convict, to bring conviction of sin, of true righteousness found in Christ, and of coming judgment.

Define conviction. To convict is to bring to a person a deep, inner awareness of their guilt and need. This is the Spirit’s gracious work of awakening sleeping consciences, exposing sin, and bringing people to see their need for Christ. Without this convicting work, no one would come to repentance.

Stress that conviction is mercy, not cruelty. We can resent conviction, the discomfort of being shown our sin, but it is a necessary mercy. A person who never feels the weight of their sin never seeks the Savior. The Spirit's convicting work is the painful but loving beginning of healing, like a diagnosis that leads to a cure.

Apply it to ourselves. The Spirit's convicting work is not only for the unbelieving world; He continues to convict believers of sin to lead them to repentance and growth. Help students welcome conviction rather than resist it, receiving the Spirit's exposure of sin as the loving work that leads them back to Christ. Ask how they typically respond to conviction, and how they might receive it as mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit's work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8).
- Conviction as a gracious awakening of the conscience.
- Conviction as a necessary mercy, not cruelty.
- Welcoming the Spirit's conviction as the path to repentance.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the Spirit's convicting work?
- Why is conviction a mercy rather than something to resent?
- How do you typically respond to conviction of sin?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus acknowledged the disciples' sorrow honestly: "because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (v. 6). How honest are you with God about your own sorrow, and what would it look like to bring your grief openly to Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' honest acknowledgment of the disciples' grief: "because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (v. 6). Jesus does not scold them for their sorrow; He names it with compassion.

Draw out the permission this gives. Jesus does not demand that His disciples pretend to be fine. He acknowledges their sorrow openly. This frees believers from the false idea that faith requires us to mask our grief or that sorrow is a sign of spiritual weakness. Honest sorrow brought to God is healthy.

Help students examine their own honesty with God. Many of us hide our grief, even from God, putting on a brave face or fearing that lament is unspiritual. But Scripture, especially the Psalms, is full of honest sorrow poured out to God. He invites our real selves, including our tears.

Press for application. Ask each student how honest they are with God about their sorrow, and what it would look like to bring their grief openly to Him. Encourage them to pray honestly, to lament, to tell God the truth about their pain, trusting that the Jesus who named His disciples' sorrow welcomes theirs. Honest grief before God is a doorway to comfort, not a barrier to it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' compassionate acknowledgment of sorrow (John 16:6).
- Permission to grieve honestly rather than mask it.
- Lament as a faithful, biblical practice (the Psalms).
- Honest grief before God as a doorway to comfort.

Discussion Prompts

- How honest are you with God about your sorrow?
- What keeps you from bringing your grief openly to Him?
- What would honest lament before God look like for you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus promised, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (v. 13). To whom was this promise of being guided into all the truth first given, and how was it fulfilled?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus promises, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (v. 13). This is a key promise, and its original recipients must be identified clearly.

Identify the recipients. Jesus speaks these words to His apostles in the upper room. The promise that the Spirit would guide them "into all the truth" was given first and specifically to them. They were the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), the ones entrusted with delivering Christ's teaching to the world. The Spirit would lead them into the full truth about Christ and His work.

Explain the fulfillment. This promise was fulfilled as the apostles, guided by the Spirit, taught and wrote what became the New Testament. The full truth about Christ, His person, His work, the meaning of His death and resurrection, the shape of the church and the Christian life, was revealed to and through the apostles by the Spirit, and preserved for us in the inspired Scriptures (compare 2 Peter 1:20–21; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Apply it with confidence. We possess, in the New Testament, the “all the truth” into which the Spirit guided the apostles. This gives us great confidence: we are not waiting for further truth or piecing together a half-finished revelation. The Spirit completed His work of guiding the apostles into the truth, and we have its fruit in the Scriptures. Set up the fuller treatment of this at Question 9, where the implications for today are drawn out.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The promise to be guided into all the truth given first to the apostles (John 16:13).
- The apostles as the foundation entrusted with Christ’s teaching (Ephesians 2:20).
- The fulfillment in the inspired New Testament (2 Peter 1:20–21; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Confidence that we possess the completed truth in Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- To whom was the promise of being guided into all truth first given?
- How was that promise fulfilled?
- How does this give us confidence in the New Testament?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus said the Spirit “will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 14). How does it shape our understanding of the Spirit’s work to know that He always points to and glorifies Christ, never drawing attention to Himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus describes the Spirit’s central aim: “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 14). The Spirit does not draw attention to Himself; He points to and glorifies Christ.

Draw out the self-effacing character of the Spirit’s work. The Spirit’s role is to magnify Christ, not to make Himself the center. He takes what belongs to Christ and reveals it. This is a crucial guide for discerning the Spirit’s genuine work: it always exalts Jesus, focuses attention on Jesus, and leads people to Jesus.

Apply this as a test. Any teaching, movement, or experience that claims to be of the Spirit but draws attention away from Christ, magnifies itself, or exalts spiritual experiences over Christ Himself, is suspect. The Spirit always glorifies the Son. A Spirit-centered focus that eclipses Christ is, ironically, contrary to the Spirit’s own purpose.

Apply it to the students’ devotion. Because the Spirit glorifies Christ, the mark of His work in us is a deepening love for and focus on Jesus. Help students see that growing in the Spirit means

growing in Christ-centeredness, not in a fascination with spiritual phenomena. Ask how this understanding shapes the way they evaluate spiritual teaching and their own walk.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit's work always glorifying Christ, not Himself (John 16:14).
- The Christ-exalting focus as a test of the Spirit's genuine work.
- A guard against teaching that eclipses Christ in the name of the Spirit.
- Growth in the Spirit as growth in Christ-centeredness.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it shape our view of the Spirit that He always glorifies Christ?
- How can this serve as a test of spiritual teaching?
- How does the Spirit's work draw you closer to Christ?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus compared their coming grief to a woman in labor whose "sorrow has turned into joy" (vv. 20–22). How does the resurrection turn the disciples' deepest sorrow into unshakable joy, and what does this teach about how God works through our griefs?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus uses a vivid image to describe the coming turn from sorrow to joy: "When a woman is giving birth... she has sorrow... But when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world" (v. 21). Their grief at His death would give way to resurrection joy.

Draw out the labor image. Labor pains are real and intense, but they are not the end; they are the painful prelude to joy. The disciples' coming grief over Jesus' death was real, but it was the birth pang of the unshakable joy of His resurrection. The sorrow was not pointless; it was productive, giving way to joy.

Connect it to the resurrection. "I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (v. 22). The resurrection transformed the cross from apparent defeat into the ground of everlasting joy. The very event that caused their deepest sorrow became, through the resurrection, the source of their greatest joy.

Apply it to how God works through our griefs. Help students see that God can bring lasting joy out of present sorrow, not by pretending the sorrow is not real, but by working through it to something greater. This does not trivialize grief; the labor pains are real. But it gives hope that, in God's hands, sorrow can be the prelude to joy. Ask students how this pattern speaks to a grief they carry.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sorrow turning to joy, pictured as labor giving way to birth (John 16:21).
- The resurrection transforming the cross from defeat to lasting joy.
- God working through real grief to bring greater joy.
- Joy that no one can take away (John 16:22).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the resurrection turn the disciples' sorrow into joy?
- What does the labor image teach about how God works through grief?
- How does this speak to a sorrow you carry?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus said, "Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (v. 24). What does it mean to pray "in Jesus' name," and how is your own prayer life shaped by this invitation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus issues a remarkable invitation to prayer: "Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (v. 24). A new access to the Father, in Jesus' name, is being opened.

Define praying "in Jesus' name." It is not a magic formula tacked onto the end of prayers. To pray in Jesus' name is to pray on the basis of His authority and His standing with the Father, as those united to Him, and in accordance with His character and will. It means coming to the Father through Christ, our mediator, asking as His representatives for what aligns with His purposes.

Draw out the access this gives. Because of Christ, believers have bold access to the Father in prayer (Hebrews 4:16). We do not approach God on the basis of our own worthiness but in Jesus' name, clothed in His standing. This is an extraordinary privilege, and Jesus urges us to use it: "Ask, and you will receive."

Apply it. Help students examine their own prayer lives in light of this invitation. Do they pray boldly and expectantly in Jesus' name, or rarely and faintly? The promise is tied to fullness of joy. Ask students how this invitation shapes, or should reshape, their prayer life, and encourage them to come to the Father boldly in Jesus' name this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Praying in Jesus' name as praying on His authority and in line with His will (John 16:24).

- Bold access to the Father through Christ our mediator (Hebrews 4:16).
- Prayer as an extraordinary privilege purchased by Christ.
- The connection between believing prayer and fullness of joy.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to pray “in Jesus’ name”?
- How does this invitation shape your prayer life?
- How might you come to the Father more boldly in Jesus’ name?

Question 9

Student Question:

Some draw on this chapter’s promises about the Spirit to claim ongoing new revelations and miraculous sign gifts today. Given that the promise to be guided “into all the truth” (v. 13) was made specifically to the apostles and was fulfilled in the inspired teaching of the New Testament, how should we understand the Spirit’s work today, and why do we not look for new revelations beyond the completed Scriptures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it directly addresses a serious modern error. Some draw on this chapter’s promises about the Spirit, especially “he will guide you into all the truth” (v. 13) and “he will declare to you the things that are to come,” to claim ongoing new revelations and continuing miraculous sign gifts today. The teacher should address this clearly, kindly, and from the text.

Begin with the recipients and the fulfillment, as established at Question 5. The promise to be guided “into all the truth” was made to the apostles, the eyewitnesses chosen to lay the foundation of the church and deliver Christ’s teaching. It was fulfilled as the Spirit led them to remember, understand, and faithfully record the full truth about Christ, resulting in the New Testament Scriptures. The key word is “all”: the Spirit guided the apostles into all the truth, leaving nothing essential undisclosed. The revelation is complete.

Draw the conclusion for today. Because the Spirit completed His work of guiding the apostles into all the truth, and because that truth is preserved for us in the completed New Testament, we do not look for new revelations beyond Scripture. The faith was “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The Scriptures make the man of God “complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). To claim new revelations is to imply that the apostolic revelation was incomplete, contradicting Jesus’ own promise that the Spirit would guide them into all the truth.

Address the claim of continuing miraculous sign gifts. The miraculous gifts in the New Testament served to confirm the apostolic message while the revelation was being given and the church was being founded (Hebrews 2:3–4; Mark 16:20). They were the scaffolding for the foundational

age. With the completion of the revelation and the established witness of Scripture, the purpose for which those confirming sign gifts were given has been fulfilled. We should be cautious and discerning about modern claims to these gifts, and we should never base doctrine on them or use the Spirit passages in John to justify them.

Then affirm clearly what the Spirit does do today, so students do not conclude the Spirit is inactive. The Spirit genuinely indwells believers, convicts of sin, helps us in our weakness, intercedes for us, produces His fruit in us, and sanctifies us, all through the truth He has already revealed in Scripture. The Spirit has not gone silent; He works powerfully, but He works through the Word He inspired, not by delivering new doctrine. Help students hold both truths: a high view of the Spirit's present work, and a settled confidence that God's revelation is complete in the Scriptures. The result is neither a dead formalism that ignores the Spirit nor a chasing after new revelations, but a Spirit-dependent life anchored in the sufficient, completed Word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The promise of being guided into all the truth fulfilled in the apostles and the New Testament (John 16:13).
- The completeness of the revelation: the faith once for all delivered (Jude 3).
- Scripture making the believer complete and equipped (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Miraculous sign gifts as confirming the apostolic message in the foundational age (Hebrews 2:3–4; Mark 16:20).
- A clear rejection of modern claims of new revelation beyond Scripture.
- The Spirit's genuine present work through the Word He inspired (Romans 8:26–28; Galatians 5:22–23).

Discussion Prompts

- To whom was the promise to be guided into all truth given, and how was it fulfilled?
- Why do we not look for new revelations beyond the completed Scriptures?
- What does the Spirit genuinely do in believers today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this chapter, from the promise of the Spirit to “I have overcome the world.” What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to face a hard world with His peace and the assurance of His victory?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question returns to the chapter's triumphant ending: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (v. 33). The aim is to send students out able to face a hard world with Christ's peace and the assurance of His victory.

Help students hold the two halves together. Jesus does not promise an easy life; He promises tribulation. But He also declares a finished victory: "I have overcome the world." The Christian faces real trouble with real confidence, not because the trouble is small, but because Christ has already conquered. The outcome is settled.

Draw out the source of peace. The peace Jesus gives is found "in me," in union with the One who has overcome. It is not the absence of trouble but the presence of the victorious Christ. This peace can steady us in the middle of tribulation because it rests on His accomplished victory, not on our circumstances.

Make it concrete and close in confidence. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to face a hard world, an anticipated trial, a present tribulation, with His peace and the assurance of His victory. Let them leave with His words ringing: in the world, tribulation; but take heart, He has overcome the world. The victory is already won, and they are on the winning side.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest tribulation joined to Christ's finished victory (John 16:33).
- Peace found in union with the victorious Christ.
- Confidence grounded in Christ's accomplished overcoming, not circumstances.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- How is Jesus forming you to face a hard world with His peace?
- How does Christ's victory steady you in present tribulation?
- What trial do you most need to face in the assurance that He has overcome?