

The Gospel of John

Lesson 21: The Promise of the Holy Spirit -- John 16:1-33

Jesus is still in the upper room discourse, still preparing His disciples for a world that is about to turn very dark. He tells them plainly what is coming: they will be put out of the synagogues, and a time is coming when those who kill them will think they are offering service to God. He is not trying to frighten them, but He will not lie to them either. The path ahead is steep. And then He says something that must have sounded almost unbelievable on that night of approaching loss: "It is to your advantage that I go away." How could His leaving possibly be to their advantage? Because, He says, if He goes, He will send the Helper.

This is the great theme of the chapter: the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus describes the Spirit's work with stunning scope. The Spirit will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Spirit will guide the disciples into all the truth, not speaking on His own authority but declaring what He hears, and will glorify Christ by taking what is Christ's and revealing it to them. The same Jesus who has walked beside them for three years is about to indwell and empower His people in a new and intimate way through His Spirit. The leaving is not abandonment; it is the doorway to a deeper presence.

Woven all through this chapter is the strange mixture of sorrow and joy that marks the Christian life. "You will weep and lament," Jesus says, "but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy." He compares it to a woman in labor, whose anguish is real but is swallowed up in joy when the child is born. Their grief at His death will give way to the unshakable joy of His resurrection, a joy, He says, that no one will take from them. The cross looks like the end of everything; it is actually the birth pangs of a joy that will never die.

And the chapter ends with a promise that has carried believers through every hardship since. "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Jesus does not promise His followers an easy road. He promises them tribulation, and then He promises something greater: that He has already overcome the very world that will trouble them. The victory is not in question; it is already won. Read this chapter and let it prepare you, as it prepared them, to face a hard world with the peace of Christ and the assurance that He has overcome.

Group Discussion: Jesus told His disciples, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (v. 33). How does honesty about trouble, combined with confidence in Christ's victory, help us face hardship better than either naive optimism or despair?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said our "sorrow will turn into joy" like a mother's labor giving way to the joy of birth (vv. 20-22). Where are you in a season of sorrow right now, and how does the promise of joy on the other side speak to you?

Read John 16:1–33

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 2:1-4, 16-18, the promised Spirit poured out at Pentecost; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, all Scripture breathed out by God and making us complete; 2 Peter 1:20-21, men carried along by the Spirit as they spoke from God; Jude 3, the faith once for all delivered to the saints; Romans 8:26-28, the Spirit helping us in our weakness.