

Earthly Sorrows Transforms into Heavenly Joys

John 16:16-23 ✠ Easter 4

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Sorrow lasts a little while. Joy lasts forever. But of course, while you're in suffering, sorrow sure doesn't feel like just a little while. Quite frankly, suffering can make your life feel like a living hell. But our perspective keeps us from seeing the truth. Our earthly perspective on our pain often makes us turn inward towards ourselves in our sufferings. We tend to focus on our feelings and emotions. The solutions to our sufferings lead us to ask questions like: 'how am I going to get out of this vale of tears? How can I turn my suffering into joy? What makes me happy?' But when we turn inward to lift ourselves out of our suffering, it generally only increases our pain.

Jesus would have us look outside ourselves, our problems, our pain, and our sin and look at Him. He would have us frame our questions about our sufferings towards a theo-centric, or God-centered, solution. He would have us understand our pain by asking questions like, 'even though I'm in immense pain, how is God caring for me through it all? How do I please God despite this terrible situation?' God provides the only true joy we can have. Only when we're with Christ, our earthly sorrows will be transformed into eternal joys. Only in Christ do we truly begin to understand our sufferings.

Jesus taught that to the disciples in the Gospel lesson. The disciples were confused about where Jesus claimed he was going. They didn't understand why Jesus will 'in a little' while be gone from them, yet return in another "little

while.” They didn’t understand how their sorrowing hearts will be turned into joy-filled hearts. In a nutshell, they didn’t understand anything Jesus was saying. Certainly, there are ways we hardly understand what Jesus says either, nonetheless, our post-crucifixion and resurrection perspective allows us to know what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about how He’ll die on the cross, which will make the disciples fearful and sorrowful.

The Gospels mention that Peter denied Jesus three times because He didn’t want to be crucified along with Jesus. He ran away weeping and in distress. Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, to only realize later he betrayed innocent blood. Out of remorse, he left and hanged himself. John was the only disciple mentioned at the foot of the cross. The rest? The rest of the disciples were most likely hiding out in the Upper Room for fear of being executed along with Jesus. That’s where they were after His crucifixion and when the resurrected Jesus came to them. They were filled with sorrow, fear, cowardice, and they hid away.

Only Christ who was raised from the dead can turn that sort of sorrow into joy! This joy turned a cowardly people like the disciples into missionaries and ambassadors for the Risen Lord! Christ gave them the Holy Spirit to testify to the truth of our sufferings ending and being completed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This Good News of God turning earthly sorrow into eternal joy traveled far and wide.

All flesh is like grass. The grass withers and the flower fades. All flesh suffers. All flesh dies. All flesh falls short of the glory of God. All flesh sins. But even though our flesh suffers, we shouldn’t discount our fleshly life. We

shouldn't view our flesh as our enemy, even though it desires sin and is weak against Satan's temptations. I often hear people either outrightly say, or they allude to it, that God only cares about our spiritual dispositions and not so much earthly matters. That all God cares about is that you believe in Him, and the matters of the flesh are insignificant. That our bodies are prisons for our souls. But this couldn't be further from the truth!

This line of thinking comes from a misunderstanding of the relationship between heaven and earth. Peter in his epistle identifies us as sojourners and foreigners on this earth. Christians don't call anywhere earthly their true home, because heaven is the true home of every Christian. We may speak of our houses being our homes, or wherever we live with family. But what Peter says is still true for Christians – we're sojourners on this earth. This earth in its present state is not our home. But not because our true ideal state as humans is a bodiless existence in the heavens. It's not because the earth is bad and the material world is bad. Some speculate as such, and you may hear it at funerals when someone says about the deceased person: 'that body in the casket isn't John Smith anymore. John Smith is in heaven. He's home.'

True, heaven is our home because God is there. But God created us to have a bodily existence – the separation of our soul and body is not the final place of rest for Christians. Our bodies are still a part of us, even after death. A part of us, our soul, is in heaven. A part of us, our body, is laid to the dust of the earth. That's why we mourn at funerals, because that truth can't escape us. We know something goes terribly wrong at death. Something isn't quite right.

And what's wrong at death is the same thing with what goes wrong in life, causing sorrows, pain, and sufferings. That thing is sin. And Satan who causes us to sin. Sin causes relationships with God and each other to splinter – dishonoring authority, lying, cheating, stealing, gossip, adultery, coveting. We're stained by our sin and suffer the sins of others in this fleshly life. But Christian faith fixates not on ourselves. Nor does it fixate on the sins of others. Faith fixates on the eternal hope and joy we have in Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus turns sorrow into joy. Jesus' resurrection certainly turned the disciple's sorrow into joy on Easter! The joy they gained from seeing their Risen Savior lasted them until their dying breath. So will it with us too. Because even though bodily death consumes Christians, there will be bodily life. Not because we've been able to navigate successfully through the pain and sorrows of our earthly life. But only through Jesus' own resurrection from the dead can we start to give our pain and suffering perspective.

In Christ, we start to see our sorrows as temporary and our joys as eternal. Because through Christ's victory over the grave, and forgiveness of sins given, our sorrows are swallowed up in the eternal joys of salvation. Even though our perspective right now is limited, we're given the promise of what's to come. Upon death, our soul will be at rest with Christ. Upon judgement day and the resurrection of the dead, our life of sojourning will end. Our bodies will be reunited to our souls and we'll live in the eternal joy of the new heavens and new earth. We'll live as God's restored creatures in His restored creation. It's this eternal promise from the cross and grave which gives us joy now, despite the sorrows we endure.

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