

---

## GOSPEL FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

---

John 16:16-23

*"A little while, and you will see Me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see Me." So some of His disciples said to one another, "What is this that He says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'?" So they were saying, "What does He mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what He is talking about." Jesus knew that they wanted to ask Him, so He said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see Me, and again a little while and you will see Me'? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, 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. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. In that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you."*

1. This Gospel reading presents and also pictures for us the high and excellent work that God accomplished when Christ, His only Son, died for us and rose again from the dead. Much has been said about this, and much more could be said. For myself, I feel that the more I study this, the less I understand it. However, because God wants us to remember Him, praise His works and grace, and thank Him for them, it is proper that we speak about this and listen to it as much as we can.

2. The Lord speaks here to His disciples in obscure and veiled words, which they do not understand. Without a doubt He chiefly does this to admonish them and impress on them these words; they sound so unusual so that they will not be forgotten. We retain words which are spoken in a somewhat unusual way much better than those that are spoken in ordinary usage.

3. That is why they repeat it two times ["a little while," John 16:17-18] and ask each other what it must mean. He also repeats it Himself a fourth time [John 16:19], and yet it remains obscure, incomprehensible words to them, until He afterward reveals what He meant. When He rose from the



dead and gave them the Holy Spirit, then they clearly understood it. So we also now understand it, insofar as we hear and read it. However, as for understanding it completely, none of that will happen in this life. Rather, as I said, the longer and the more we learn it, the less we understand, and the more we must learn.

4. God's Word is a different government, and the Holy Scriptures are a different book than human speech and writings. St. Gregory said it well (and found a good proverb): Scripture is the kind of water in which a large elephant must swim, but a lamb can walk through on foot. It speaks clearly and brightly enough for the common people but, on the other hand, so profoundly to the wise and very intelligent that they cannot comprehend it. St. Paul makes this confession about himself (Philippians [3:12]).

5. St. Peter says what was asserted and written in [Scripture] was so great that even the angels have more than enough to do in looking at the great work [1 Pet. 1:12], that Christ, God's Son, became man, suffered death on the cross, but rose again, and now sits at the right hand of the Father as Lord over all, also according to His human nature, and governs and preserves His Church against the devil's wrath and the power of the whole world. We certainly listen to the words about this, but they (the angels) see and understand it and have their eternal joy in it. Just as they in eternity cannot look at it enough, much less can we understand it enough, for it is a work that is imperishable, inexpressible, immeasurable, and inexhaustible.

6. We are speaking here about *cognitio obiectiva*,<sup>1</sup> that is, as it is seen with a glance, as the angels look at it, and as we in the life to come will see it. But in this life we must have a different understanding of it, which is called *cognitio practica*,<sup>2</sup> that we learn to recognize what the power of this work is and what it can do. That happens through faith, which will cease in the life to come, where we will fully know it.

7. So we need to learn here what it means when the Lord says in this text: "A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me" [John 16:19], etc.; and that this means: "You will be sorrowful, and the world will rejoice" [John 16:20], etc., "but your sorrow will become joy." This is an unusual way of speaking: "For a little while you will not see and be sorrowful, and then in a little while you will again see and be cheerful."

8. According to the letter and the history, it is easy to understand what these words mean (especially now). In the confession of our faith, even the children say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, etc., crucified, dead, buried, and risen

1 Literally, "objective awareness" or "knowledge of an object."

2 Literally, "practical knowledge."



again from the dead on the third day.”<sup>3</sup> These are the two “little whiles” He is talking about here.

But when the matter is dizzying, and we are to test and taste and bring it into life or experience, it becomes very hard to understand, if in ourselves we lose Christ, whom we believe to be God’s Son died and risen for us, etc.—that He should be dead for us, as the apostles experienced it during the three days. It is a miserable crucifixion and dying when Christ dies in me and I also die in Him. He says here: “You will not see Me, for I am going away from you”; that is, I am dying, and you will also die because you do not see Me. Thus I will be dead to you and you will be dead to Me. That is an especially high and difficult sorrow.

9. Here on earth there are various kinds of sorrow (just as, in turn, there are various kinds of joy). For example, someone is robbed of his money and goods, is insulted and reviled when innocent, loses father and mother, child and dearest friends, etc. Likewise, the devil distresses someone’s heart and torments him with depressive thoughts (as he certainly can), so that he does not know why or how.

However, the true, high sorrow above all sorrow is when the heart loses Christ, so that He is no longer seen and there is no hope of further comfort from Him. There are few who are tested so highly. Not even His disciples were all tested in that way, such as perhaps St. Thomas, Andrew, Bartholomew, etc., who were such good, plain, and simple people. But the other tender hearts—St. Peter, John, Philip, etc.—were affected by these words, when they heard that they would lose Christ and not see Him.

10. This had been preached to these disciples more than to the others, who certainly also believed and knew that Christ died and afterward rose again. For them also it was “a little while,” but in a common, insignificant, and childlike way; and it was only a bodily sorrow. But these disciples truly had to feel and put to the test what it meant to lose Christ out of their sight, when He was taken from them not only bodily but also spiritually, and so also to have at the same time twofold distress and sorrow.

They had had not only the bodily joy in Him—that He was with them so long, cared for them, ate and drank with them, and enjoyed delightful, sweet acquaintance and fellowship [with them]—but also He had especially dealt with them in such a pleasant way, borne their weaknesses, and spent time with them more pleasantly and delightfully than any father with his child. He also often let them run on coarsely and even speak nonsense. For that reason it pained them to lose such a pleasant Lord.

11. But [their sorrow] was much greater because they had set their hearts on Him becoming a mighty Lord and King and setting up a government in

3 I.e., the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed (Kolb-Wengert, p. 22; *Concordia*, p. 16).



which they together with Him would also become lords and never die. That had so far been the sincere joy and confidence they had in this Savior.

12. Now, however, they lose both completely at once, not only the pleasant association with the Lord but also this beautiful, glorious confidence. Suddenly they fell into the abyss of hell and eternal sorrow. Their Lord was most shamefully put to death, and they themselves must now expect every hour that because of Him they will be seized in the same way. They must now sing the dirge: "How completely is our confidence now lost! We hoped through this man to become great lords and to have all the joy we desired. Now He lies in the grave, and we have fallen into the hands of Caiaphas and the Jews. There are no more miserable and unhappy people on the earth than we."

13. This is the true grief and sorrow about which Christ is properly speaking here, into which God does not lead everyone, and no one easily; but then He gives the comfort to which He points in this Gospel reading. Other bodily suffering and danger can also be called "sorrow," such as when we suffer persecution, prison, and misery for the sake of Christ and must lose goods, honor, and even our lives.

But the greatest of all [sorrows] is when Christ Himself is lost. Then all comfort is gone, and all joy is at an end, and neither heaven nor sun and moon, neither angel nor any creature, not even God Himself, can deliver. Apart from this Savior (Christ), there is no other in heaven or on earth. If He is gone, then all salvation and comfort are gone, and the devil has acquired the opportunity to afflict and alarm the distressed heart. He wants to do this, even under God's name and person, at which he is a master.

14. On the other hand, the joy that is greater than all others is what a heart has in the Savior, Christ. It is also, to be sure, called "joy" when we rejoice in great prosperity, money and goods, power, honor, etc.; but that is all still only childish and foolish joy. Then there is also the shameful, devil's joy which rejoices at another's harm and misfortune. About that Christ says here: "The world will rejoice and laugh up its sleeve at your crying and weeping when they kill Me and afflict you with all misfortune."

Also, in other worldly affairs, there are many who cannot be happy unless they have done harm or seen things go badly for their neighbors. They are just like the poisonous animal, the salamander, which is so cold that it can even live and protect itself in fire.<sup>4</sup> So these people live and thrive on other people's harm. It is the beautiful fruit of the devil when a wonderfully

4 "The salamander . . . is so intensely cold as to extinguish fire by its contact, in the same way as ice does" (Pliny ["The Elder," 23-79], *Natural History* 10.86 [Loeb 353 (1956), pp. 412-13]). Pliny also offers an entire section on the salamander, which begins "Of all venomous creatures the salamander is the most wicked" and continues with an extensive description of the poisonous character of the salamander (*Natural History* 29.23 [Loeb 418 (1963),



envious person is sad that things go well for someone else and would be glad to lose an eye if that meant that his neighbor would have none.

15. But all this is still nothing compared to the joy which the world (urged on by the devil) has against Christ and His Christians. It rejoices most at the great harm when Christ is crucified, all the apostles are driven out, the Church is knocked to the ground, His Word is silenced, and His name is completely blotted out. This also is a spiritual joy (just as, on the other hand, great sorrow is spiritual)—however, it is not from the Holy Spirit, but from those who belong to the devil in body and soul, and yet are called the wisest, the most learned, and the holiest on earth. In the Jewish nation, these were the high priests, Pharisees, and scribes, who had no peace and knew no joy so long as they heard the name of Christ spoken and His Word resounding, or saw one of His disciples still alive.

As [the godless] say, "It is intolerable to us to hear or to see Him" (Wisdom of Solomon 2 [:15]), etc. When He hangs on the cross, they slander and revile Him with great joy: "If He is God's Son and the King of Israel, let Him climb down from the cross. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now" [Matt. 27:40, 42–43], etc. How their hearts leap with joy—what a paradise, what a heavenly kingdom they have, when they see the dear Lord reviled on the cross and put to death. That they themselves have done this is to them only sugar and malmsey.

16. Christ gives this joy to the world, and, on the other hand, He gives His Christians the great sorrow of having to see, hear, and endure that which permeates their hearts, bodies, and lives. Thus He truly pictures the world in an abominable and frightful way as a child of the devil which has no greater joy than to see Christ annihilated and His Christians shamefully condemned and lost.

17. We see just this now in our dear squires, the pope, cardinals, bishops, and their scum, who delight and rejoice when they sense that it is going somewhat badly with us, and would gladly have that fact not hidden but resounding even into the abyss of hell. Dear God, what have we done to them? Do they not have goods and money, power and everything in abundance, of which we have scarcely a crust of bread? Is it not enough that they prevail over us with everything they desire, and we are otherwise afflicted and miserable? Must they be so bitterly hostile to us besides, that they do not want us to have God's grace but want us to burn in the deepest fire of hell?

18. This is a horrible picture and the true fruit of the hellish spirit. They cannot rejoice so greatly over the good nor over worldly or human joy; they do not love gold or silver so much, no string music sounds so good, no

---

pp. 230–33]). For proverbial reference to the salamander's poison, cf. *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), LW 37:269 (WA 26:402); *Table Talk* no. 4790, WA TR 4:512.



drink tastes so sweet as when they see the misfortune and distress of righteous Christians. They are so inflamed with hatred and revenge that they enjoy no really happy hour until they can sing: "Praise be to God, the evildoers are at last gone! Now we have rooted out the Gospel." Meanwhile, they have no rest and taste no joy until they have brought this about.

So far they have attempted this and in part accomplished it by all kinds of clever artifices, machinations, and tricks, and God has allowed them to have a little fun with some of them; they labored away slowly on each of them and removed them. But that was still far from cooling their rage, as they had desired.

19. Therefore, Christ now means to say here: "You have now heard both what kind of joy the world will have and what kind of sorrow you will have. Therefore, learn and remember this, so that when it happens and you experience it, you can have patience and lay hold of true comfort in this suffering. So I must let you be tested so that you taste what it means for Me to be lost and dead in your hearts, so that you learn to understand this mystery and secret a little. Otherwise you will not finish studying Me, for it will be too high for you to finish learning the high work that God's Son goes to the Father, that is, dies for you and rises, so that He also brings you to heaven. If I do not have you tested now and then, you will remain foolish and finally become good for nothing.

20. "Therefore," He says, "you must agree and submit to being tested about what this *modicum* ('a little while' [John 16:16-19]) is, and yet not despair and perish. That is why I tell you ahead of time that it must happen. You must have and suffer such sorrow (both inwardly and outwardly, that is, in body and soul). However, when it happens and the little hour begins when you have nothing more with which to sustain yourself, but have lost both Me and God, then remember My words, which I am now speaking to you: 'It is only a little while.' If you can only learn this saying and remember these words—'a little while' and 'again a little while'—then there will be no danger.

21. "Of course, the first *modicum* ('a little while'), when you now see that I am still with you until I go away from you, is still to be suffered and overcome. But the second 'little while' until you see Me again will be especially long and difficult. It is the true hour of sorrow, when for you I will be dead, along with all the joy, comfort, and confidence you had from Me, and you yourselves will be totally lost.

"However, dear little children, only remember and do not at all forget what I am telling you now: 'It will not last forever.' I must be lost and unseen for a little while. You must now experience and learn this. But remember only this much, that I have called it 'a little while,' and in My eyes it is only a little, short hour, even though in your hearts and feelings it is not a little while, but a



great while, even an eternal, great while and a great, eternal while. According to your feelings you will be unable to think differently than that I have been taken away from you and that you have lost everything, because I am the eternal good and the eternal comfort. When that is gone, then there is only an eternal and no longer a little while, namely, eternal sorrow and death."

22. So He preaches here for the comfort of His disciples and Christians when they are tested by God with this temptation, whether it happens inwardly or outwardly, bodily or spiritually, especially in the highest point which is called losing Christ from the heart. They are to learn this passage, and if they can do no more, retain this drop of lavender water to refresh and strengthen their hearts: "My Lord Christ has said it will be only a little while."

Even if I now have lost Him and know no joy at all, but lie languishing in sheer sorrow, yet I will use that drop and retain this tonic: that He will not remain lost to me. He says, "It will only be a little hour," even though it seems to me to be great, long, and eternal. He will return, as He says here and in John 14 [18]: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will return to you," etc., so that I am to have in Him eternal comfort and joy instead of this little hour of sorrow.

23. On the other hand (Christ goes on to say), you must allow the world to rejoice over your suffering and sorrow, even though it has no reason for it except sheer devilish jealousy, by which it is so highly blinded, embittered, and soured that it has no joy until it sees you stumble and perish. That is their heart's joy and delight—they regard it as a heavenly, eternal joy—as they then say: "Let us now see if God will deliver Him. If He is God's Son, then let Him come down from the cross" [Matt. 27:42–43], etc. It was as if they would say, "He is now gone, and He is at His end, forever!"

24. But look at what follows after this. "Just as," He says, "you shall not be eternally deprived of seeing Me, nor remain in your sorrow, so they also shall not eternally rejoice at your misfortune; rather, it shall also be for them only a short hour and (as they say) 'like a dance at high Mass.' I will return to you soon and make it worse and more bitter for them than it has ever been before." This was fulfilled in them after the resurrection of Christ, since the Jews had no more bitter suffering than that they must hear of our Lord Christ and see Him. Apart from that, it pleases them somewhat to slander Christ and His mother, Mary, and us Christians most shamefully. But they can never again have true joy, even though they would like to have it and still always hope that their messiah will come and root out all Christians.

25. So also our Caiaphas and Judas, the pope with all his rabble, continually take comfort in the hope that we will be rooted out. However, they cannot be happy, because we live and the Gospel spreads. Nothing in which people take delight helps them at all. Some are so depraved that they cannot



cease their raging and raving until we are all dead. When that happens, they will for once be happy, but it will still not be the kind of joy they want. Even though we are dead, the Gospel will still remain [cf. Isa. 40:8], and others will come in our place, and that will again be new grief for them.

26. The Turk also intends to root out Christ and to set up his Mohammed in all the world; he rejoices whenever it starts to happen. However, the joy for which he strives will never happen. This, our Lord (whom [the Turk] himself nevertheless highly exalts and must regard to be a great prophet), will keep this [joy] from him and finally make it salty and quite bitter for him through the great work of His death and resurrection, by which He tramples underfoot sin, death, and the devil. God accomplished this through Him and announced it previously in the Scriptures; on that basis the dear prophets and fathers died in this joy, as Christ says about Abraham (John 8 [:56]).

27. If [Abraham] received this when it had not yet happened, but was only in the Word and promise, how much more can and will he receive it in the future after it has happened and has been spread in the world and even in heaven by the angels! Neither the pope nor the Turk will and can suppress and blot that out. They can certainly suppress it and think that they are tasting sugar when they do Christendom a little harm, but they shall never obtain the joy for which they hope and thirst.

28. They can rejoice for a while (Christ says [John 16:20]), but not longer than while you are in sorrow. That is an especially brief joy, just as your sorrow is brief and is only a little while. It will soon be changed into joy, and into the kind of joy that no one will take away from you. Without a doubt, their joy will also become sorrow which will not end.

29. However, you will be unable to have enough of your joy here on earth, nor will it be of full measure, enough to quench your thirst. Rather, you will have only a sample, a taste, or a sip. [This joy] is too great and can never be exhausted, just as the work that produces this joy is far too great for us to finish learning it. God mingles and mixes things on the earth so that those who should by right rejoice must have much suffering and sorrow, while, on the other hand, those who should be sorrowful have joy and good days.

Yet this happens in such a way that their outward joy becomes salty. They cannot acquire the true inner joy that they desire, and so they also lose their outward joy. They cannot take joy in their goods, power, honor, pleasure, and luxury, and they cannot lay their heads down in rest until they see that Christ is dead and His Christians are exterminated. They are always poor, miserable people whom we can easily pity. The worst is that, because of their jealousy and hatred, they cannot have their temporal joy pure as they would like. Through themselves we have already been avenged far too much toward



them, for how could they have more misfortune and do themselves greater harm than that they themselves lose and destroy their joy?

30. On the other hand, we also have sorrow, both outwardly and inwardly (when Christ hides Himself from us), but not, like them, because of jealousy and hatred toward our neighbor, but because we do not have the highest good, Christ. But then sugar is already mixed into the sorrow, for Christ says: "Dear friend, only wait a little while. It will not be an eternal sorrow, but only a brief sorrow, and soon it will be better. We are only dealing with a little hour."

31. I hear these words, but the sorrow (when it is there) so deeply oppresses my heart that I do not feel this comfort, and I think that it is impossible that it should cease. Nevertheless, I am kept from falling away from Christ to that crowd. Although I still have trouble and danger, yet the sorrow must not be completely filled with bitterness, just as, on the other side, their joy is not completely filled with sweetness and sugar. Rather, just as their joy is always corrupted by wormwood and gall, so this sorrow still has sugar and honey with it.

32. Therefore, let us listen to Christ and learn to understand His language, so that we do not judge according to our feelings, as if we were eternally lost and it would never end. "You feel and think that way," He says, "I certainly know it. But listen to what I say to you and learn only this word *modicum*, 'a little while.' You must feel this, but it will not harm you and will not last long." In that way sorrow has already been covered over with sugar and alleviated.

Afterward, when the little hour is past and has been overcome, then we experience what He says, "Your sorrow will become joy" [John 16:20]. Then a true, heartfelt joy begins, and the heart sings an eternal "alleluia" and "Christ is arisen," which will be completely perfect only in the life to come, without any lack and without end.

33. Thus this Gospel reading presents to us both the articles of the death and resurrection of Christ and how these must be learned and used "practically," in our work and experience, not only heard with the ears and spoken with the mouth. So when we feel this power working in us, then both body and soul are changed through it.

Namely, when Christ dies in me and I in Him, that is a great change of life into death. However, then I must learn to cling with faith to the words Christ says—"a little while"—and not only hear but also take to heart that it will not last forever. Rather, there will be a change from death to life when Christ again rises and lives in me and I become alive in Him. Then it is said, "I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" [John 16:22], etc. Every Christian should be equipped for this when it is necessary, for he must experience something of this either in life



or at the hour of death. He is to be equipped so that then he can remember these words of Christ and not let this comfort be torn from his heart. Amen.

34. Whatever more is to be said about the text of this Gospel reading you can read for yourself in the explanation of the three chapters of John, the sermons Christ preached to His disciples at the Last Supper, in which this and the following Sunday's Gospel reading are treated at length.