



SAYING GOODBYE TO JESUS



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John 16:16-33
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A few weeks ago, I told you that my wife, Rachel, and I rescued a dog shortly after we were married. I was initially opposed to getting a dog. It was the first fight of our marriage and the first one I lost. I wish I could say it was the last one I lost.

So we rescued a dog from a local shelter. In addition to not wanting to be alone, our dog had some serious fear issues. He warmed up to Rachel, but he was scared of me. He would be sitting on Rachel's lap in the living room. When I would walk in the room, he would lift his head, look at me, jump to the floor and trot out of the room. This wasn't good for my fragile self-esteem. So it would be fair to summarize that this dog and I got off to a rocky start.

But eventually, we got past it. Eventually, the dog trusted me and became part of our family. With Rachel and me, he became completely comfortable. But he was still scared of most other people. And then his fear turned to aggression. Several different times he bit people who scared him.

Then we got pregnant. And we realized that we couldn't have a biting dog with a baby in the house. We tried to give him away, but it was impossible to find a home for a dog like this. So we realized that we had to put him to sleep.

I remember so vividly going to the veterinarian; being in the room with him as he got a shot; holding my hand on him as he peacefully fell asleep. And then sobbing uncontrollably as we drove home. I had grown to love this dog. But then I had to say goodbye. Saying goodbye is never easy.

We are in the midst of a series during Lent on the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John. This is part of our larger year-long series through the entire Gospel of John, called *Signs of Life*. We've seen Jesus wash the disciples' feet. We've seen him talk about friendship with God. Last week we saw Jesus prepare his disciples for the suffering that will result from following him.

This morning we come to the last moments of Jesus' interaction with his disciples. Our passage is John 16:16–33. Next week will conclude the Upper Room Discourse when Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples. This week is the end of his conversation: his last interaction with the

disciples. This is where Jesus says goodbye. This week, we look at what it means to say goodbye to Jesus.

Saying Goodbye to Jesus

As we've studied the Upper Room Discourse, we have repeatedly observed something about what this text means to us. Jesus is preparing his disciples to go on without him. But we have never experienced having him in the first place. We live in faith today without ever knowing the physical presence of Jesus. So as he prepares his disciples, he is speaking directly to the state that we are already in.

In this final conversation, Jesus helps them to know what it's going to be like without him. He wants them to know what it will feel like when he's gone. He wants them to know how they will relate to God when he's gone. And he wants them to know how they will think about him once he's gone.

He tells them how they will feel, how they will worship, and how they will think without him around. He is summarizing the basics of the life of the faith: emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. These words help us follow Jesus. They help us to know and understand our feelings, our worship, and our thoughts.

As Jesus says goodbye to his disciples, he helps us to know what it is like to live in this in-between time.

Grieve Expectantly

Jesus starts off by describing the emotional experience that the disciples will face once he leaves. He is very honest about how difficult it will be. He contrasts their experience with what others around them are feeling. And he uses a powerful metaphor to help them relate to the dynamic.

John 16:16–22—

“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”
¹⁷**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?'" ¹⁸So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." ¹⁹Jesus 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'? ²⁰Truly, 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. ²¹When 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. ²²So 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.

Jesus begins by telling his disciples about leaving and going away. They are confused by his statements. He recognizes their confusion. He points out the exact question that they want to ask. And then he refuses to answer it. Why does he do this? Why couldn't he just have said, "I am going to be executed, but I will come back to life after three days?" Presumably, he could have told them that he would die at 5 p.m. on Friday, but he'll meet them for coffee at 10 a.m. on Sunday. He didn't do that. Why?

I think Jesus was preparing them to be apart from him without knowing all the details. That's how we live now. We know he's coming back, but we don't have the details. Jesus wanted his disciples to learn to endure that experience. So instead of giving them more information, he tells them how it's going to feel while he's gone.

He says it will hurt. It starts with sorrow. The pain I felt saying goodbye to my first dog doesn't compare to the pain that some of you have felt as you've said goodbye to parents and children and friends. And that pain doesn't compare to the pain of saying goodbye to Jesus. Goodbyes start with grief.

Jesus wants his followers to be realistic about the pain they will face. We don't have to pretend that life is perfect. We don't have to try and rise above difficult things and act like they don't bother us. Jesus says that we will weep. We will face hard things. We will grieve.

But he invites us to grieve a certain way. We don't grieve without purpose and we don't grieve without hope. Our weeping is a temporary state. Verse 20 says, "*You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.*"

In the first four verses of this passage, the words "*little while*" show up seven times. He wants them to know that whatever sorrow we feel in this world is temporary.

Not only is our sorrow temporary, but the joy that will replace it is going to be permanent. Verse 22 says, "*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.*" You will grieve, but it will be temporary. And the joy that replaces it will be forever.

Jesus wants to help his disciples know how it's going to feel when he is gone. He paints a clear picture of some of the emotions that we will have. Temporary sorrow followed by permanent joy. Jesus says that while he is gone, we grieve. But we grieve expectantly.

Only once in my life, have I gotten a flat tire while driving. I've had slow leaks before, but only once has a tire gone completely flat while I'm driving on it. It happened at a very inconvenient time. It was about two o'clock in the morning. My wife was in the car. We were on the way to the hospital. Rachel had gone into labor with our second child.

This was especially problematic because our first child had arrived in record time. The doctor barely had enough time to administer the epidural before she was born. We'd been told that the second one comes out faster, so we were worried about even making it to the hospital on time.

Of course, I did what a good husband ought to have done. I continued driving to the hospital on my flat tire. I reasoned that it would be easier to replace the rim on my car than to find a replacement father for the child who was about to be born. It was a good decision.

My wife was in pain. She wanted me to get to the hospital as quickly as possible. But now, ten years later, there is a person in our lives. As intense as that pain was—and I'm sure it was excruciating—it can't compare to the fact that someone new exists.

That's why Jesus uses this example in verse 21. It's actually a picture that Isaiah used in his book, several centuries earlier. In chapter 26, Isaiah describes God's people as being like pregnant women in the pangs of childbirth waiting for deliverance from the suffering of the world. He encourages them by saying, "*hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, the Lord is coming.*"

What is the grief that you are in the midst of right now? There's always something for each of us. What is it for you

this morning? Jesus wants you to expect that sorrow is part of this world. But it will be replaced by permanent joy.

We grieve. We have to. We cannot rise above what Jesus refers to as the tribulation of this world. But we grieve expectantly. We know it is temporary. We know something permanent is coming.

Ask Confidently

Jesus is having his last conversation with the disciples before saying goodbye. He begins by describing the emotional experience of being without him. Then he tells them how their relationship with God will change when he leaves.

John 16:23–27—

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. ²⁴Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

²⁵I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. ²⁶In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.

The first sentence of this section is a bit confusing because of the way it's translated in the ESV. There are two different Greek words that are both translated as "ask." Jesus talks about asking nothing of him. Then he says that whatever we ask of the Father will be granted. It's likely that Jesus is describing two kinds of asking.

The first one probably has to do with asking questions. That's why the New American Standard translates the first part of this verse as "*you will no longer question me about anything.*" It is part of the same train of thought that Jesus continues later when he talks about not speaking in figures of speech anymore. He is saying that there will come a time when our questions about Jesus have been answered.

The second part of the verse has to do with making requests. "*Whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.*" When we make requests, they will be granted. When we ask for something, we will receive it.

So Jesus speaks of a day when we won't have unanswered questions about Jesus and we'll get whatever we ask from God.

How many of you have questions that you'd like to ask Jesus? Me too! How many of you have asked God for something that he hasn't given you? Me too.

So what is Jesus talking about? It's not actually that complicated. He is saying what we think he is saying.

Jesus is saying that we understand who he is. The Spirit has helped us to put all the pieces together. He is saying that we have a basic understanding of the ministry of Jesus, his death, his resurrection, and what it means for those who have faith in him. And we do; we *do* understand all those things.

In the 4th century AD, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the early church agreed upon language to describe who Jesus is and what he did. It's known as the Nicene Creed. It describes Jesus as begotten, not made. It says that Jesus is one being with the Father, that he came down from heaven for us and for our salvation, that he suffered death and was buried, that he rose again and ascended into heaven, and that he will come again in glory.

In the sixteen centuries since, none of those have been disputed by orthodox Christians. Sure, there are questions I'd like to ask Jesus. But all the big ones have been answered. Our major questions have been resolved. That's an incredible thing: we know who Jesus is.

And that leads to the second point. Because we know who Jesus is, we can expect that when we ask for something in his name, God will grant it.

If I were a teenager today, I would be a huge fan of Harry Potter books, for one obvious reason. I would want with all my heart to be Harry Potter: a magician, with a magic wand. I would love to be able to wave my magic wand and have things happen the way I want them to happen.

I think we're tempted to read this verse this way. Jesus is our magic wand. When I wave his name around—"in-the-name-of-Jesus-Amen"—things should happen. I should get what I want.

But can you imagine a world like that? I don't really want you to be able to get whatever you ask for just because you believe in Jesus. I don't think I'd like what some of you ask for. And when I'm honest, I don't think I'd trust myself with that kind of a magic wand.

Just like Jesus isn't talking about every possible question being answered, he's not talking about being given every whim of what we want. He's talking about becoming partners with him in his purposes. He's talking about us being a part of what he's doing. And he's saying that we can influence it. We can affect how God works out his plans by asking him.

Later in the Bible, the author of this gospel clarifies this. In 1 John 5:14–15, he says, *“this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.”*

This may sound like we can ask for anything as long as God was going to do it anyway. But that misses the point. God knows what he wants to do in the world. But there is a lot of flexibility within his plan. So within the larger framework of God's work in the world, we can have an effect on how things happen. We see this all throughout the Bible, as faithful men and women change the course of history by asking God for certain things. We can influence God as we partner with him in his work.

Jesus puts these two ideas together. We know who Jesus is, and we are invited to ask the Father for what we want. We are empowered to make requests of God. Because we are confident in knowing Jesus, we can ask confidently. Jesus began by describing how we will feel. Now we describe how we will worship. We can ask confidently.

Asking for what you want is one of the most dangerous things you can do. Asking is a great risk.

I recently listened to a TED¹ talk on vulnerability where the speaker was talking about the things that make people feel the most vulnerable. Almost all of them had to do with asking for something that you wanted: asking someone out, initiating sex with your spouse, asking for a raise or a promotion, interviewing for a job, making an offer on a house.

Asking for what we want is terrifying because we are opening ourselves up to being told “no.” And sometimes God will say no. Sometimes what we ask for isn't in line with his overall purposes. We aren't usually told why or how, but our desires don't always fit with what God is doing in the world.

Sometimes we think that God likes saying “no.” That if we get him to say “yes” to something then we've managed to trick him or manipulate him. Some of us had parents like that. Some of us have bosses like that. Some of us are

like that at times.

What Jesus is saying in this verse is that once he leaves, he will be advocating for us. We can ask things directly of God. And God wants to say “yes.” He wants for us to ask, and he wants to say “yes.”

Asking is vulnerable because when you ask for something, you give over control. A true request gives the other person total freedom to say “yes” or “no.” When you ask instead of demand, you give up control.

What is something you want? Maybe it's something you've been afraid to ask for. Maybe you don't think you deserve it. Maybe you don't want to be vulnerable and ask. This morning, I'd invite you to ask for it. Ask God for what you want.

Jesus says that we can ask confidently, not because we know we will get exactly what we want. But because we know who Jesus is. Our questions about him have been answered. We know Jesus. We know he is good. Because we know God, we can ask confidently. We can ask for what we want and give him control.

Believe Humbly

Jesus and his disciples are saying goodbye. He is helping them to understand what things will be like in his absence. He has talked about how they will feel when he is gone and has encouraged them to grieve expectantly. He has talked about how they will worship when he is gone and encouraged them to ask confidently. In the last several verses, we see Jesus address how they ought to think. He addresses their faith.

John 16:28–33—

I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

²⁹His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.” ³¹Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³²Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³I 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.”

The first verse of this section is a great summary of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus began with the Father. Then the Word became flesh: he came into the world. Now he is leaving the world and he will end up right back where he started: with the Father. A full circle, but so much has changed in between.

At this point, the disciples get excited. They think they have finally put all the pieces together. It's the first time that they even claim to "get it." They have figured out a major part of who Jesus is. They recognize that he has come from God.

This has been one of the key ideas that has come up throughout the entire gospel. Over and over again, Jesus is trying to get people to realize that he is "from God." Next week, we'll see Jesus summarize his entire relationship to the Father in this way. This is a major part of the identity of Jesus. Perhaps the core of it in this gospel.

In John 3:2, Nicodemus said, "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God.*"

In John 9:16, some of the Pharisees questioned Jesus saying, "*This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.*"

In John 13:3, this is the identity of Jesus that leads him to wash the disciples' feet: "*Jesus, knowing . . . that he had come from God and was going back to God.*"

Now, the disciples have figured it out. They get it!

You have to feel a little bad for them. They just can't seem to get a break. Even once they've figured things out, Jesus still challenges them. He knows that this belief of theirs is preliminary. It is still untested. It is fresh and new. So he warns them. He tells them that when his hour of trial comes, they will scatter. One confident realization won't carry them. They need more.

I think that what Jesus is after is faith that is realistic. Belief that knows its own bounds and recognizes its weaknesses. Jesus wants us to believe, but he wants us to know that faith is a process of growth and learning. We won't get there all at once. Charging ahead with a naive sense of conquering the world won't help anyone. Jesus wants us to believe, but to be humble in our faith. He wants us to believe humbly.

I've recently started coaching volleyball for my daughter.

It's a lot of fun. And I've noticed this interesting dynamic of how the better athletes progress. They have to be confident in their ability. They have to believe that they can do something. But they also have to be teachable. They have to know that they have a lot to learn.

I can see it when I'm explaining something to one of the girls. Some of them disconnect because they think there is no way they could ever control the ball. They don't listen because they have no confidence. These girls look down at the ground while I'm talking to them.

Others don't listen because they think they don't need any help. They think they know what they are doing and my attempt at helping is just an annoyance that they have to endure. They look around while I'm talking, just waiting for me to be done.

But some of them listen. They think about what I'm saying. They look me in the eyes and watch the motions I'm describing. They know they need to learn, but they are also confident that they can learn. They will be able to do it if they try.

This is the kind of attitude that Jesus is trying to develop in his disciples. A confident faith that is aware of how much they need to grow: belief that takes heart and is willing to face into tribulation and grow from it.

I've seen both these extremes in the church too. Some people think they have it all figured out. They know all the doctrine and life is just a simple matter of applying some biblical rules to situations. This may work for a while for some people, until it doesn't. Then they don't know what to do. They didn't know life could be so complicated. I'd say that this has been my path of spiritual growth: overconfidence followed by disappointment.

That can lead to the second extreme. Some have completely lost confidence. Maybe they used to think they knew what they believed, but then life happened. They have faced tribulation, depression, health problems, relational conflict, and infidelity. They no longer know what they believe or whether they believe at all.

The first extreme needs to recognize that our faith is a work in progress. We never have it all figured out. They need to learn humility. The second extreme needs to see that even a weak faith can grow and develop and flourish.

That's why Jesus ends by telling them to take heart. He wants them to know that they will face trials. But he wants them to know that he's already won the victory over them. The very forces that will end up scattering them and

shaking their faith have already been defeated.

Because of that, we can take heart. We can believe humbly.

What do you know of Jesus? Who do you know him to be for you? Savior? Lord? Friend? Comforter?

Faith is hard. It can be tiring. But Jesus won't let us down. He is persistent, but he is gentle. He will help us to believe humbly.

Conclusion

This passage contains the last interaction between Jesus and his disciples before he faces the cross. It is his goodbye to the disciples. Next week we'll see Jesus praying for his disciples and get a fascinating look at the kinds of things Jesus thinks we need help with. But this week, Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples.

It's hard to say goodbye to someone. In the days after we said goodbye to our first dog, life was totally different in our home. Many of you know the pain of an empty spot at the table where a loved one used to sit. It must have been hard for the disciples to continue believing in Jesus after they couldn't be with him anymore.

It can be even harder when you don't have the chance to say goodbye. Losing a loved one without being able to say goodbye to them can be especially heart-breaking. We didn't have the chance to say goodbye to Jesus because we never walked with him. It's hard for us to believe in him when we don't have his physical presence.

Jesus has told us what to expect. He has told us how it will feel. It will hurt, but not forever, and there will be great moments of joy to remind us of that.

He talks about the spiritual experience of faith: an understanding of who Jesus is based on the clear revelation of the Scripture, and the invitation into a trusted partnership with Jesus. We can be terrified of asking for what we want. It seems too risky, too vulnerable. Yet, Jesus invites us to ask boldly of the Father.

Finally, he addresses how we think of our faith. We know what we are to believe about Jesus, but we must do so humbly. We must always be willing to learn and grow

and fail and get up again. Jesus wants us to believe humbly.

Come to God with your grief. Ask him for what you want. Tell him what you know about him.

Goodbye is an old contraction of the phrase "God be with ye." When we say goodbye to Jesus, this is what we are saying. We don't have Jesus in the flesh, but we do have God. God is with us. Bring him your grief, your request, and your faith. He will hear you.

NOTES

¹TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today is a series of conferences and talks covering topics from science to business to global issues. TED is owned by a nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation, and uses the slogan "ideas worth spreading." www.ted.com