



An Excerpt from *Friends with Jesus* by David Christensen

It is dark and quiet in the streets of old Jerusalem now. Most people have gone to bed in preparation for the great feast. The disciples follow Jesus through the winding streets, stopping periodically for him to teach then breaking into clumps of two or three to talk as they walked. They had rounded the corner of the great eastern wall of the temple and walked alongside the massive eastern gate. Soon they would cross the Kidron and enter the garden on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. They knew where they were going, yet they sensed in their souls that they didn't! It wasn't easy to understand what Jesus was telling them, and they questioned it among themselves. They were confused and upset. They were entering what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul."

Just like the disciples, we are often confused and upset. We do not understand what the Lord is sometimes doing. And just like the disciples, our confusion leads to tears of frustration and fear. We enter our dark nights of the soul, a necessary step on the path to intimacy with Jesus. A foreboding sense of looming loss engulfs us. Confusion! Fear! The disciples' response is typical. They don't ask Jesus their questions but instead whisper and wonder with one another. We do the same. We seek solace with a friend, sympathy from a spiritual leader or lapse into brooding despair. Dark nights can seem so endless.

### SEEING JESUS

Jesus anticipates what they are thinking and predicts that their current confusion will lead to tears. Twice in these verses, he tells them the riddle which keeps them wondering. "A little while, and you will no longer behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me." It has been a puzzle for theologians for 2,000 years now. What exactly did He mean by that statement? The first half is clear enough. Jesus is talking about the cross. He has been talking about the cross before. The cross is the source of their sorrow but what is the source of their joy? What does Jesus mean by the second half of the expression?

Jesus could be talking about the second coming. He could be referring to His return in glory to claim the world for Himself. The problem with this view is that it would then make the time of sorrow or grief this entire age. Jesus would be saying that the time of tears is the entire period of church history until He comes again. It would appear from this context that Jesus implies that the time of sorrow is a

short while, not an entire age. He uses the imagery of a woman in labor which implies a short time span, not an entire age.<sup>1</sup>

Some think that Jesus must be talking about the coming of the Spirit. He has been saying much about the Holy Spirit in these verses, so it fits with the context. However, there are two problems with this view. First, it requires two different kinds of seeing. They soon will not see Him as they do now with their physical eyes but will see Him with spiritual eyes. The interpretation is possible but awkward. The second problem is that the disciples are filled with joy long before the Holy Spirit comes upon them in power (John 20:20).

Jesus likely has His resurrection in mind here. The seeing is a reference to the resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. It is the resurrection that changes their sorrow into joy. It is the resurrection that transforms their tears into hope. It was only during the days when Christ was in the tomb that the disciples were overcome with grief. As soon as they saw Him alive, it changed everything. Then they understood what He was saying – yet not fully! The sight lacked insight. The resurrection filled them with joy, but the joy was short-lived. They needed a joy that would carry them through life without Jesus physically present. The Spirit of God is the source of that kind of joy, so there is a sense that Jesus saw farther than His post-resurrection appearances here. He saw what we need today.

Seeing Jesus involves more than merely seeing Jesus! Helen Keller, blind from birth, once said, “The saddest thing in the world is people who can see, but have no vision.”<sup>2</sup> Seeing Jesus through the eyes of faith involves spiritual insight, that is to say, insight produced by the Spirit of God. Two different verbs are connected to two time sequences (“a little while”). The first “little while” is the interval of time until His death on the cross. After the cross “you no longer see Me.”<sup>3</sup> The seeing, in this case, is sensual in nature. It means to “be a spectator, look at or observe.”<sup>4</sup> After the cross, the disciples ceased to see Jesus with their physical eyes for a little while. Jesus goes on to say that you will see Me. The second verb used here refers to spiritual insight.<sup>5</sup> Jesus combines Easter with Pentecost. The resurrection appearances certainly involved physical sight, but, when the Holy Spirit arrived on Pentecost, the understanding was transformed into spiritual insight. The second “seeing” carries this double sense. The Holy Spirit turns physical sight into spiritual insight.<sup>6</sup>

However, we must be careful not to over-spiritualize this insight as if it is only a spiritual vision without any reference to actual physical sight as some do.<sup>7</sup> The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were bodily appearances verifiable by physical eyes, not mere visionary spiritual experiences. One clue that the physical sight and the spiritual insight are both true is found in the parallel expression where Jesus says, “After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me” (John 14:19). The same verb is used in both sightings – the pre-death and the post-resurrection sightings<sup>8</sup> – making a distinction between sight and insight irrelevant in this statement.

Seeing Jesus involves more than merely seeing Jesus but not less than seeing Jesus. The post-resurrection sightings of Jesus were actual physical sightings not merely visionary experiences of faith. The bodily sightings of Jesus were understood by the spiritual insight of the Holy Spirit even as He was actually visible to those who saw Him. Seeing by the eyes of the body and seeing by the eyes of faith converge to form a single seeing, protecting our faith from both mysticism and rationalism.

## BIRTH PANGS OF JOY

There are times when life is confusing and painful. We feel like we have wasted our time and our energy. We feel like God has abandoned our dreams and ambitions. Our world has crashed and burned around us leaving us nothing but the blackness of the storm clouds. Because we are confused – we cry! We give up. We quit. In 1916, Oswald Chambers gave a talk to a group of soldiers in the YMCA hut at Zeitoun Camp in Egypt as World War I raged around them. He died a year later at the age of forty three while serving as Chaplain with the British troops in Egypt. Chambers told them, “Watch out for the shallow optimism that proclaims every cloud has a silver lining. There are some clouds that are black all through.”<sup>9</sup> There are times in life when even the most mature believers are confused. That confusion leads to tears as we cry out to God that we do not understand what He is doing. We can see no silver lining, but we can cling to a golden promise! Jesus tells us that eventually our tears are turned to joy (16:20-21).

Paul Brand, the renowned leprosy surgeon, writes: “I have come to see that pain and pleasure come to us not as opposites but as Siamese twins, strangely joined and intertwined.”<sup>10</sup> I came across this proverb somewhere. “The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears.” Ed and Betty Hinds had become good friends since I worked with Betty at the college. We kept in touch after she left the job and we prayed together over Ed’s declining health. One day I visited Ed in the hospital. It was the highlight of my week. Ed had a severe stroke a month earlier and had been unable to speak or move much since. That day he was up in a wheelchair. His mind was sharp, and he could say some words. He could move in the wheelchair. Ed, Betty and I cried with joy together. I left with tears of thanks in my eyes for the grace of God. I say this gently but truthfully; there is a greater joy in seeing Ed now than the joy I had in seeing Ed before although Ed may never be the same again. The greater joy comes through deeper pain.

Ravi Zacharias tells the story of meeting two missionaries who had served in Iran for fourteen years. He joined Mark and Gladys Bliss with a group of Iranian Christians for fellowship one night. The Iranian host told him their story. Mark and Gladys were driving with their children and some friends to visit a church some distance from Teheran when they met with a tragic accident. All three of their children were killed. The other couple also lost a child in the accident. Ravi looked across the room at Mark and Gladys as his new friend told him the story. He marveled at the peace they exuded despite burying three children while faithfully serving the Lord in Iran. How does a person carry on under such weight? “Their testimony became a shining light in our community,” his Iranian host continued. “Only their faith in God carried them through.”<sup>11</sup>

The process of spiritual growth Jesus is modeling in this passage develops our faith by not always answering our questions. We have questions just like the disciples. We want answers just like they did, but Jesus does not always give us answers to our questions. The words which Jesus uses in verse 20 for weep and mourn are funeral words. They depict the weeping and wailing of those who mourn at a funeral. Jesus is not answering their questions at all. Instead, He prepares them to suffer, grieve and ultimately rejoice. He doesn't tell them what they want to know. He tells them what they need to hear. Our needs are the focus of Christ, not our questions.

The first word for weeping was used for expressing the intense emotion of deep sorrow at the death of a loved one. In the Old Testament, it indicated the act of wailing as a form of dependence on God instead of an expression of total despair. The second word for weeping was used for a funeral dirge. The bewailing of death was often characterized in public by striking the chest and singing dirges in a loud voice.<sup>12</sup> The first two words refer to outward expressions of grief, but the third word speaks of inner suffering.<sup>13</sup> The only other time the word is used in John described Peter's feelings when Jesus

asked him after the resurrection if he loved Jesus. Peter was grieved (John 21:17). The contrast between all who grieve and the world that rejoices intentionally intensifies the pain of grief for the believer. The joy of the world makes their tears more painful, but, of course, the story does not end with their tears and the world's joy.<sup>14</sup>

Their tears will not merely be replaced with joy.<sup>15</sup> The very event – the cross – that causes their tears will become the event that brings them joy. So today, the symbol of the cross – the source of sorrow – has become the symbol of faith – the source of hope. The very same event can change pain to joy. Jesus uses the example of childbirth to illustrate the point (v. 21). Birth pangs had long been associated with the coming of the messianic figure in the Old Testament (Isaiah 26:17-18; 66:7-8; Hosea 13:13). Jesus is predicting the birth pangs of the Messianic Age. Pain is often the precursor to joy in our lives. Suffering on earth leads to the joy of heaven. Our tears at death are the birth pangs of our joy in life with Jesus forever.

### PAIN: THE SETTING FOR HIS JEWEL

Many times in our lives today Jesus chooses to meet our needs not answer our questions. Our need is for a friend, not an answer man. We need someone who walks with us through life, not a computer that can predict the future. We need to grow spiritually and sometimes the only way we can grow spiritually is to endure the struggles of life. Many of our greatest griefs, our greatest struggles provide the means to grow the greatest in our faith. The cross is the only grounds for grace, and we will only enjoy the grace when we accept the cross. The difference between Peter and Judas was three days! Peter denied the Lord and Judas betrayed the Lord. Both sinned. But Peter hung around for three days and Judas hung himself. Suicide has a way of making decisions permanent. Both sinned horribly, but surely the forgiveness of Christ would have been equally offered to Judas as it was to Peter. Judas was not there to receive the forgiveness because he made his final decision. The difference was three days of waiting on the Lord. One enjoyed the joy of God's grace, and one felt the sting of Christ's judgment. The waiting was the difference!

An ancient Hindu parable speaks of a master who was teaching his young apprentice about pain. The apprentice was complaining about his lot in life, so the master placed a handful of salt in a glass and told him to drink it. He took a gulp and immediately spit it out. The brine was bitter. The master then took him to a lake and threw a handful of salt in the lake. He told the apprentice to drink from the lake. He did and was refreshed. The pain in life is the salt; the master taught him. How much bitterness you taste depends not on the salt but on the container that holds the salt. Pour the glass of pain – the bitter brine you taste – into the lake of God's grace. Our pain is absorbed in His grace turning our grief into joy.<sup>16</sup> Christ may never answer our greatest questions in this life, but he will meet our deepest needs.

Our tears are the seeds of joy not merely the forerunner to joy. Jesus says, "Your grief will become joy." He is not saying that grief is merely the precursor to joy. He is not saying that joy will eventually replace the grief. Joy is not the substitute for tears. Tears are not the promise that joy will come eventually. What Jesus is saying is that the same event which caused the tears is the event which brings the joy. *Your grief will be turned into joy!* Every mother knows this principle which is why Jesus uses the analogy of childbirth. I had the privilege of being in the room for the birth of both my girls. I marveled at my wife. We had waited eleven long years to have children. She had endured multiple surgeries and months in the hospital to give birth to a child. The process had been long and hard. The birth itself was filled with suffering for her. During the pain of labor, there were great tears, and those

tears did not stop with the birth. They were the same tears, but now the tears had been turned to joy. The same event brought both grief and joy.

Elisabeth Elliot wrote, “God’s ultimate purpose in all suffering is joy.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus does not take away the tears to give us joy. He does not replace our tears with joy. Instead, the tears of pain become the tears of joy. There is a pain which is purposeful. The cross of Christ brings first great pain, but the same event is the means of great joy. In our lives today, the event which brings the greatest suffering and loss is also the very event by which Christ gives us the greatest joy in life.

God, who whatever frenzy of our fretting  
Vexes sad life to spoil and destroy,  
Lendeth an hour for peace and for forgetting,  
Setteth in pain the jewel of His joy.<sup>18</sup>

### OWN THE PAIN

In January of 1956, five missionaries landed their plane on a little sandbar on the Curaray River in Ecuador. Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully and Peter Fleming were trying to reach a tribe of Indians known as the Aucas with the gospel of Jesus Christ. All five were murdered by the Aucas leaving behind nine children in shock. Steve Saint was one of those children. In 1996, Steve wrote an article entitled, *Did They Have to Die?* He told the untold story behind the murders.

Rachel Saint, the sister of Nate, and Elisabeth Elliot, the wife of Jim, surprised the world by returning to the Aucas to live among them. Eventually, most of the tribe accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. Steve Saint spent many a summer vacation living among the men who had killed his father. No one ever really knew what had happened or why because the Aucas never talked about it. The families had pieced together much of the story from diaries and pictures. Even though Steve had made friends with the very men who killed his father, he never asked them what had happened because it was his right to avenge his father’s death as the oldest son, and he didn’t want them to think he sought details out of a spirit of revenge.

Then in 1995 Steve heard the whole story from four of the men who killed the missionaries. One man in the village had wanted to marry a young girl, but the family did not approve of the marriage much to the frustration of the young man. One day the man followed the young woman into the woods. An older woman went with them as a chaperone. They ended up with the missionaries, and the man was taken for a plane ride. All was going well until the young girl and the man slipped off into the jungle while the older woman stayed behind. They met a group of Aucas including the girl's brother. The brother accused him of compromising his sister. The man knew that he would be killed, so he told them that the missionaries had attacked them. A lie told to save a man’s life became the basis for the murderous attack the next day. The Aucas murdered the missionaries because of a lie. Steve Saint asks the question: *Did they have to die?* And he answers it with a yes. The death of the missionaries was something these Auca people never could understand. They had guns but did not defend themselves when attacked. It was this event, filled with so much pain for all involved, which melted the hearts of these people and eventually resulted in so much joy for all eternity.<sup>19</sup>

Our tears are turned to joy, and our joy is a forever joy (16:22). No one can take that joy away. Here we have the cycle of Christian joy which is played out for the disciples in those three days of agony. It is played out in our lives as well. There is the pain of the cross which is followed by the hope

of the resurrection. Then we see the power of hope to change the disciples from disillusioned and defeated to bold and victorious. Finally, there is the assurance of joy which comes by faith. It is the joy no one can take away from us. The joy comes by faith. We must trust God that whatever he takes us through there is a purpose to the pain, and, even if we don't understand the purpose, the pain can be used to bring great joy – a forever joy – which no one can ever touch. This transforming joy is the power of the resurrected Christ in our lives.

Purposeful pain produces permanent joy we embrace by faith. Martin Luther was prone to depression. He would sometimes isolate himself for days on end from everyone. His family would remove any dangerous item in the house for fear that he might hurt himself. One time, his wife, Katherine, dressed for a funeral and entered his room during one of these times of blackness. Luther asked her who had died. She replied, "No one." But then she added that from the way he was acting, she thought God had died!<sup>20</sup>

Jerry Sitsler lost his wife, Lynda, his four-year-old daughter and his mother in a tragic car accident in 1991. Killed by a drunk driver, he had to pick up the pieces of life as he cared for his other three children all under the age of eight. His loss was horrific, and he plunged deeply into the darkness of despair. He had a recurring dream that the sun was setting, and he was running as hard as he could after the sun only to see it set plunging him into darkness. Terror would grip his soul. He thought he would live in darkness forever. The dream dominated his thinking until his sister, Diane, told him that the quickest way for someone to find the sun was not to run west chasing it into the darkness but to run east embracing the darkness until the sunrise!<sup>21</sup>

Joni Eareckson Tada, who has taught us so much about suffering over the years since her tragic diving accident that left her a quadriplegic, spoke at a conference I attended. She challenged us that we have to own our weakness for God to begin His work in our lives. She told how she struggled with despair for two years until she learned His lesson. She and a group of friends had enjoyed a night out and ended up in Penn Station at 10:30 at night. They were feeling happy and having fun, so they started singing. The acoustics made the singing sound great. An officer, thinking they had partied too much, came over and told them to leave. It was a public area. He turned to Joni in her wheelchair and said, "Missy, put that wheelchair back where you got it." She was shocked and replied, "But it's my wheelchair!" They all laughed that night, but her friend said to her that the moment was powerful because for the first time in two years she had called it "my wheelchair!" It was the beginning of her healing. Joni had to own her pain to experience God's joy. She often says that she wouldn't trade the wheelchair for anything because through that wheelchair God has given her the gift of His joy.

When we are going through our days of darkness, we must remember the cycle. The same events that bring us so much pain now will be used of God to teach us a forever joy in Him. It is the pain of the cross which brings the greatest joy. Never get far from the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> The second "little while" is the interval of time between the cross and the resurrection. The adverb "again" (παλιν) ties the two intervals together negating any identification of this "seeing" with the return of Christ. The two "seeings" are connected closely in time by the adverb.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Dann Spader and Gary Mayes in *Growing a Healthy Church*, Moody Publishers, 1993, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> The verb (θεωρεῖτε) is in the present, not future, tense which is significant – you see Me no longer. "No longer" (ουκετι) does not mean "never again." The action simply stops (Bernard, *John*, p.513).

<sup>4</sup> BAGD, *Lexicon*, p.360.

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<sup>5</sup> A different verb (οψεσθε) is used for resurrection sight, and it is a future tense (from ορω). This verb replaces the former verb because it is always used in John to emphasize spiritual perception (Bernard, John p.513).

<sup>6</sup> TDNT, V:360.

<sup>7</sup> Meyer, *John*, p.451.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *John*, p.703.

<sup>9</sup> Oswald Chambers, *Baffled to Fight Better*,

<sup>10</sup> Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, "And God Created Pain: A world-famous surgeon's appreciation for the gift nobody wants." *Christianity Today*, January 10, 1994, vol. 38, no. 1, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>12</sup> NIDNTT, 2:416-420.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard, *John*, 2:515. The word is λυπηθησεσθε. It is future passive, meaning that something outside the person causes the inner grief.

<sup>14</sup> There is a sharp contrast in the verse which an English translation cannot bring out effectively. The "you" (υμεις) is emphatically placed at the end of the clause immediately adjacent to "the world" (ο κοσμος) beginning the next clause.

<sup>15</sup> The verb is γενησεται which means "to be or become." Morris, *John*, p. 705.

<sup>16</sup> Dick Staub, *Too Christian Too Pagan*, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Elliot, *A Path Through Suffering*, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> F.W.H. Meyers, quoted by Elliot, *A Path Through Suffering*, p.42.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Saint, "Did They Have to Die?" *Christianity Today*, 9/6/96, p.25.

<sup>20</sup> Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, Crossway, 2008, p.144.

<sup>21</sup> Jerry Sitser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, Zondervan, expanded edition, 2004, p.42.

