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The Gospel of John
XLVI. When the Spirit of Truth Comes
John 16:1-15

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Our passage begins with Jesus telling His disciples, *“I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.”* So the first question, I suppose, is what are all “these things” – followed closely by why is Jesus worried about their “falling away.” To begin with, “these things” are the content of Jesus’ farewell address to His disciples, which began back at the start of chapter fourteen and will conclude at the end of chapter sixteen. The cross is drawing nearer as Jesus’ last supper with His disciples in that upper room begins to come to a close. And Jesus has said to them many wondrous things in His farewell address: that in His Father’s house are many rooms, and He is going to go prepare a place for them¹; that He is the way and the truth and the life which will lead them to that place prepared²; and perhaps more than anything else, He has spoken to them repeatedly of His love for them.³

But along the way, He has also said two things that have disturbed the disciples. The first is that He will soon be leaving them. When He brought this up the first time, at the start of chapter fourteen when He was telling them about going to prepare a place for them, the disciples had responded with curiosity. Thomas had asked Him, “Lord, where exactly are you going?”⁴ But as the night has gone on, Jesus has told them a second disturbing thing, so disturbing that the disciples have completely lost interest in where Jesus is going – notice Jesus commenting in our passage that none of them now seem to be concerned at all over where He is going! What is this second thing? Jesus has told them that when He leaves, the same religious leaders who have been opposed to Him, who will soon place Him upon a cross to die, will then turn their attention upon them, His disciples. John 15:20: *“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”* And then again in our passage: *“They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.”* No wonder the disciples are a little disturbed at this point in Jesus’ farewell speech to them. And no wonder, also, that Jesus should be so concerned about their falling away.

But in our passage Jesus then speaks to them a promise that will not only keep them from falling away in the face of what is to come, but a promise that will enable them to glorify God in the face of what is to come. He says to them: *“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”* The disciples, having heard this, must have blinked their eyes in confusion – how could it possibly be to their advantage for Jesus to go away from them, especially given what He has just said awaits them when He is gone? So Jesus then explains to

them, lays out for them, three ways in which His going away, and the subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit, will indeed be greatly to their advantage.

The first advantage is that in sending the Holy Spirit, Jesus can and will continue to be with them – and to be with them in a way more immediate and more intimate than was possible during His time with them on earth. By the Holy Spirit, He will enter into their hearts and minds, into their inmost thoughts and prayers, into their every hope and fear as they face what must be faced when He leaves. Not only so, but He will be able to be with them all, each one, at the same time – no matter where they are. Jesus, in His Incarnation, has been limited by the same laws of physics which affect us all: He could only be in one place at a time. But when the Spirit comes, not only will His presence with His disciples be deeper and even more powerful, but He can be with each of them, at every moment, in every place, all at the same time. It is the same promise He makes to us when He tells us that He will be with us always, even to the end of the age.⁵ And that certainly has great advantages for both the disciples then and for us now.

But the second advantage of Jesus' leaving and the Spirit's coming is that the light Jesus has shone into the darkness of this world during His earthly ministry will continue to shine even after He is gone. In fact, will shine more brightly and more broadly than during His time on earth. Through the Holy Spirit, the Light of Christ will shine into the darkness of every land and of every human heart. And the mission of Jesus Christ to redeem the earth will not only continue after His death, resurrection, and ascension – but through the Spirit working in and through Christ's disciples and in human hearts everywhere, the Light of Life will reach every corner of God's creation.⁶

That is what Jesus means when He then speaks of how the Spirit will “*convict the world*”: “*And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.*” The Spirit will continue Christ's work of convicting us and all mortals of our sin – which is the opening movement by which we begin to make the salvation journey out of the darkness of sin and into the light of Christ's redeeming love. The Spirit will continue to convict the world, reveal to the world, the sin which traps us in darkness – so that we might identify the darkness for what it is, and so that we might then choose the light over that darkness.

And notice how Jesus then defines our sin: “*concerning sin, because they do not believe in me.*” The fundamental sin, the fundamental nature of what is wrong with us and what is wrong with this world, lies not in what we do or do not do in relation to the laws of God. Rather sin, in its original and most fundamental form, consists in what we do or do not do in relation to God Himself. As with Adam and Eve in the garden, so also with us: sin begins not when we break the rules by biting into the forbidden fruit, but rather when we first decide to pick that fruit off of the tree in order to live our lives as if God doesn't matter to our lives, or as if God didn't exist at all.⁷ The Spirit enables us to see the darkness of that decision not to trust Him with our own lives, as well as the global consequences of everyone making that same wrong decision as it plays out in the life of the world – and so invites us to confess that darkness, repent of that darkness, turn to the One who alone is our light and our life, our salvation from darkness.

Which is what lies behind the Holy Spirit convicting the world also regarding righteousness and judgment. “*Concerning righteousness,*” says Jesus, “*because I go to the Father*” – meaning

that the Holy Spirit enables us to see Jesus Christ as the only One who can bring us out of sin's darkness, this world's darkness, back into the light of God's love and life. The Holy Spirit enables us to see that Jesus is indeed the way and the truth and the life by which, alone, we are led out of darkness and into the light of our Maker's love – righteousness, right-relatedness once again to our God and to one another.⁸

Concerning judgment, also, because as the Spirit brings us further into the light of Christ, we begin to see that the kingdom of this world, to which we formerly belonged, is going to be destroyed – such that, more and more we see and so resolve to live our lives not for this world and its values, but for the everlasting Kingdom of God and its values. I remember one of my seminary professors putting it this way: that one of the worst ways in which we can waste our brief time on earth is by climbing the ladder of success only to find that it has been leaning against the wrong building. To lean our ladder up against what the world calls success – which leads only to the judgment of God – instead of leaning our ladder up against what God calls success – which leads to the Kingdom of God.

Which leads us, then, to the third advantage of Jesus' leaving and the Spirit's coming – the one that truly will keep us from wasting our lives, truly will keep us from falling away: *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” “He will **guide** you into all the truth”* – meaning the Holy Spirit will not only continue the presence of Christ with us always, not only bring us out of the world's darkness and into the light of life eternal, but also the Spirit will keep us from falling away from that light, that life, which is ours in the light and life of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will do this by guiding us into not just knowing the truth, but also into being able to live out that truth. The Holy Spirit will guide us into ways of thinking, ways of desiring and deciding, ways of acting which not only bring us more and more into the light and life of Jesus, but which also enable our lives shine with glory to God. The Holy Spirit is given to us that we should not fall away, but instead walk more and more by Christ's light even while still in this world's darkness, for the rest of our days – until at last we enter that room prepared in the Father's house.

So what then does this look like in an actual human life – this not falling away, guided by the Spirit into all truth way of life? Don Everts, in a little book entitled God in the Flesh – a book that has deeply fed me and one I turn to again and again – Everts suggests that all we have to do if we want to see what new life in Christ looks like is to look at the disciple Peter, and see how Peter was changed by the Spirit – to see how Peter was guided by the Spirit into a not falling away, glorifying God, walking in the light sort of life. Let me read to you from Everts' book:

Before Calvary, Peter always came across as a man of strength and oaths and aggression. Or weakness and fear and pettiness. Kind of depended on when you caught him. Of all the disciples, Peter defined the extreme ends of the spectrum of human strength and human weakness.

Consider the moments leading up to Calvary. It's Peter who bravely stands up to Jesus' admission that one of the disciples will betray him. “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you” (Matthew 26:33). What bravado! What pluck!

He actually argues with Jesus over this point and ends with a defiant “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (verse 35).

And the next moment Peter can’t even stay awake for Jesus. Three times Jesus asks him and the other disciples to please stay awake and pray for him (the first time Jesus has ever explicitly asked for personal support from his disciples), and yet Peter falls asleep. Again and again and again. What weakness and pettiness and hypocrisy.

But when the soldiers come, it’s Peter who pulls out a sword and starts fighting! Strong Peter is back.

But then all the disciples flee, including Peter.

But in the end Peter does follow at a distance. “Going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end” (Matthew 26:58). Maybe he’s planning an escape? Maybe he still has his sword with him? Whatever the case, we know it took bravery to sit in among those guards.

But then a servant girl recognizes him as a follower of Jesus and he swears he doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Another servant girl recognizes him, and “again he denied it with an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’” (Matthew 26:72). And when the crowd gets in on the questioning, “he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’” (verse 74).

After that last denial, the cock crows.

Peter weeps. And is dropped from the narrative.

The trials happen. The cross happens. Saturday goes by. And Peter is nowhere to be seen in the narrative of any of the Gospels. And we’re left to wonder: which Peter will surface on the other side of the cross? Strong Peter or weak Peter?

As it turns out, neither. A different Peter.

Consider what we see from Peter once the narrative picks him up again: Peter runs to the tomb after hearing that Jesus was risen. (Sure, he’s a slow runner, but as soon as he puffs his way there, he runs right past timid John!) Peter jumps into the lake and swims to Jesus. (Once he recognizes that it’s Jesus, he puts on his clothes and dives in. He can’t even wait for the boat to sail in!) Peter hauls in the nets of fish by himself. (Jesus had asked all the disciples to help, but it’s Peter who pushes them all aside and does it himself.)

This does seem like a different Peter, doesn’t it? He’s acting a little silly for a grown man. Running? Jumping into the water to swim to Jesus? I would argue that he’s almost acting like a man in love.

Have you ever been around people who are falling in love? They’re all helpful and energetic and giddy. They never walk toward their beloved casually (Peter ran to the tomb), often do silly things when their beloved is around (Peter dove into the water and swam

to shore) and usually have lots of energy and helpfulness flowing from them (Here—I'll get those fish!).

And that's the Peter we're shown after the cross. I am not suggesting any sort of romantic love, of course. But Peter *is* acting differently. Before the resurrection, he was an intense man, rocking back and forth between strength and weakness. A tight-fisted man of purpose and oaths and intensity.

But then Easter happens. And Peter is a different man. Something new seems to be happening inside him.

And then Jesus has breakfast with him on the shores of the same sea where they had first met. And after breakfast Jesus has a question for Peter. Only one question.

I probably would have asked Peter if he was going to deny me again. Or if he was feeling drowsy again. (I can be pretty sarcastic.) If I were Jesus and were about to hand Peter the authority to start and lead my church on earth, I would want to know if he was going to be more stable, more strong, more consistent. But no. Jesus has only one question for Peter. A simple one: Do you love me?

Do you love me?

He asks three times. And three times Peter says that he does. And three times Jesus calls him to "feed his sheep." Peter's new role and authority, Jesus asserts, do not rest on his strength and consistency and oaths but on his love for Jesus . . . Jesus wanted Peter to remember what it was really all about. And I think he did.

In his first epistle it's Peter who writes, "Although you have not seen him, you love him" (1 Peter 1:8) and "Love one another deeply from the heart" (verse 22) and "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (3:8). Tender heart? Humble mind? Peter is definitely a changed man! . . .

Based on his letters, we can see that Peter remained a man of love. Preoccupied with this Jesus who had died for him. It would seem that Peter remembered that last breakfast and what Jesus had asked him on those shores.

. . . Because when it comes right down to it, that question (Do you love me?) is the most important question. Period. Not will we be strong enough? Not will we get it all right? But do we love Jesus? Are we taken with him? Are we captivated by him? Do we love him?

That's really what it all comes down to . . .

It's not about human strength or weakness anymore . . . It's about the person of Jesus and his life and death and resurrection. It's about being preoccupied with him, staring at him. And falling in love with what we see there.

It's about seeing Jesus clearly, in all of his holiness and brilliance and authority and power and mercy and divinity and sacrificial nature and beauty. It's about taking the Gospels seriously and seeking in their pages the true image of Jesus that has been handed down to us.

And it's about being changed by that clear image. It's about finding the seemingly elusive blessings of life growing from within. Blessings like unity and thanksgiving, wisdom and humility, peace and evangelistic fervor. Blessings that can't be corralled or forced with human strength.

Blessings that come only from within as we become Jesus saturated.⁹

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” And that is the promise, once given to Peter and now given to us – that will keep us from falling away. But not just keep us from falling away, but keep us moving deeper and deeper into this new life – the rich life, the good life, the God-glorifying joyous life which Jesus promises us can be ours and shall be ours *“When the Spirit of truth comes.”*

¹ John 14:2-3.

² John 14:6

³ John 14:20-21; 15:9, 12-13.

⁴ John 14:5.

⁵ Matthew 28:20.

⁶ John 1:4-5, 9-13; 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46.

⁷ Genesis 3:1-7.

⁸ John 14:6.

⁹ Don Everts, God in the Flesh (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 156-160.