

John 16 - Preparing for the Worst ¹

Before the Lesson: There are no handouts or other items needed for this lesson.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

One way that we “prepare for the worst” is to purchase insurance. What types of insurance do you have? (health, life, dental, car, property, travel, etc.)

One way that we “prepare for the worst” is to prepare a will. Do you have a will? If not, do you plan to prepare one?

Information

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. When word of this miracle reached Jerusalem, a large crowd gathered.

- Have a class member read John 12:17-19.

Jesus was on top of the world! The disciples celebrated with the residents of Jerusalem a grand entrance of Jesus. It was exciting to see people drop to their knees as Jesus passed by on a donkey, to watch them throw their coats in his path and wave palm branches to celebrate Jesus’ arrival. And it seemed that after three years of public ministry, Jesus really had “arrived.” Everyone loved him. Everyone wanted him to show more power from God. Everyone wanted him to free the nation from Roman bondage.

But Jesus knew that this was not God’s plan for his life. Things were going to change quickly. His disciples needed to be prepared for the worst, for the worst was surely coming. (And there was no such thing as Messiah-loss insurance!)

As Jesus concludes his long, final discourse, he ends with warnings and encouragements.

Jesus has told the disciples already that he would leave them. The departure of any leader creates a tentative, risk-fearing, insecure group of followers. This was true of Jesus’ disciples. It was also true of the early church (to whom John is writing) as the fathers and mothers of the faith died.

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“The challenge of succession: How do we make the critical transition to the next generation? John’s whole Gospel can be read as a response to this question. It is written for those who have not seen Jesus, in order to enable them to meet him and receive his Spirit... ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (20:29).’”²

- Have a class member read John 16:4-7.

“The disciples need to be reminded not so much about Jesus’ destination as about the consequences of his return to the Father for them; they need to think not so much about his absence as about how he will continue to be present with them.”³

You may have heard the saying, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” Do you think that is true? How does that relate to the spiritual life?

“Learning the truth of God would be a slow process, interwoven with the growth of their personal experience. Personal experience, however, would not be enough in itself. Vagaries and errors would quickly lead them astray unless the living Spirit provided them with His guidance. He was promised to them in order to meet these emergencies, so they might be kept on the right path.”⁴

Jesus says, “It is to your advantage that I go away.” “Not only is decline not envisaged; instead, there is confidence that the community will flourish even more after his departure... It is yet another dimension of John’s wisdom of abundance, in line with the promise of Jesus that ‘he gives the Spirit without measure’ (3:34).”⁵

“The finishing of his life’s work is followed by a greater generativity, as he inspires ‘greater work than these, because I am going to the Father’ (14:12).”⁶

“The ‘world’ saw in the death of Jesus proof of his *wrong*, but the Spirit is to bring home to people the fact that he was *right* (and righteous!), since his ‘lifting up’ on the cross was one with his exaltation to the throne of God. That act, moreover, entailed the dethronement of the devil, who led the world to oppose him and put him to death. The world accordingly shared that

² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 310.

³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 337.

⁴ Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), 238.

⁵ Ford, 310.

⁶ Ford, 311.

judgment, and its continuation in rejecting Jesus as Lord continues to implicate it in that judgment. To reveal the truth of these realities is the task of the Paraclete-Spirit.”⁷

- Have a class member read John 16:12-15.

Reflect on this statement: “Some truths can be taken in only after the space for them has been hollowed out by suffering in love and service.”⁸ How have you experienced or witnessed this?

“Like a spotlight which brings some object into brilliant relief against the blackness of the surrounding night, but which calls no attention to itself, the Spirit’s chief mission is to make [people] conscious of Christ rather than Himself.”⁹

“Because Jesus will send the disciples into the world as the Father has sent him (17:18, 20:21), they will need the Spirit to point them continually to Jesus, that they might bear fruitful witness to the one who is life for the world. With Jesus’ departure, the disciples find themselves in uncharted territory, beset by unknown challenges and obstacles to witness and faith. The Gospel promises that the disciples can and must trust the Spirit to guide and instruct them so that what they say and what they do always bears witness to the truth that is embodied in and through Jesus.”¹⁰

- Have a class member read John 16:16-24.

Jesus compares the pain of loss with the new mother’s pain of gain. How might this image give the disciples comfort?

- Have a class member read John 16:25-33.

“The Greek word for *figures of speech*, *figures*, and *figure of speech* (vv. 25, 29) is *paroimia*. In the Septuagint both this word and *parabole* (‘parable’) are used to translate the Hebrew word *masal*, and the meaning can include various forms of comparison and puzzling language, including parables, allegories, proverbs, and riddles.”¹¹

Jesus affirms God’s love for the disciple’s love for and belief in his Son (v. 27).

⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Themes (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 96.

⁸ Ford, 315

⁹ Tenney, 239.

¹⁰ Thompson, 339.

¹¹ Ford, 322.

“The theme of belief is central in the final discourses. The opening verse of the discourse, 14:1, puts it as an entreaty or command: ‘Believe in God, believe also in me.’ Here is the core message of the Gospel: to know and believe in God is to believe in Jesus. And to know and believe in Jesus is to truly know God. One who wants to know God need only know Jesus as the true image of God. ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’ (14:9-10). For those who believe, the relationship with God is secure and has a future.”¹²

Jesus reminds the disciples that he came from and would return to the Father.

“Culturally, it is very important to know where Jesus is from so he might be situated in the status ranking order in terms of geography and genealogy. This was the way to obtain proper stereotypical knowledge of him. For Nicodemus, for example, Jesus’ origin is like the wind/spirit; you do not know where it comes from and where it goes (3:8). We later learn of the Jerusalemites’ burning concern to know where Jesus is from in the discussion in chapter 7 (vv. 27-29, 37-52). Judeans know that God spoke to Moses, but this man, ‘we do not know where he is from’ (9:29). Finally, even Pilate seeks to know: ‘Where are you from?’ (19:9).”¹³

Jesus is speaking on an entirely different level from “geography and genealogy.” Those are temporal and surface ways of identification and stratification. Jesus is speaking on a mystical, spiritual, eternal plane.

“He spoke as the Son of God in the sphere of his own eternity, first declaring the incomprehensible fact, ‘I came out from the Father’; and secondly, the manifestation of that fact, ‘and am come into the world.’ He then announced his self-determined purpose of leaving the world, ‘I leave the world’; and finally, declared his destination, ‘and go unto the Father.’ Thus in briefest space and simplest words we have a declaration of the whole redemptive progress of the Son of God. From the Father into the world; in the world manifesting the Father; from the world unto the Father.”¹⁴

“With gentle pity He showed them that while they might be convinced of the fact, they had little understanding of its nature, telling them that the hour had positively come in which they would desert him; and yet in view of that desertion He spoke to them the word of peace, and bade them good cheer, because He had overcome the world.”¹⁵

¹² Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 99.

¹³ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 129.

¹⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to John*, The Analyzed Bible (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909), 193.

¹⁵ Morgan, 194.

“If he is from God, there are no questions to be raised. Yet Jesus even now questions whether they really believe this. Recall that the term *believe* in John (antilanguage indicating loyalty and trust, being an insider, being embedded in the group) encapsulates the interpersonal bonding with Jesus that the Gospel is all about (20:31). The disciples think that they have fully understood and truly ‘believe.’”¹⁶

“Jesus is deeply skeptical: Jesus answered them, ‘Do you now believe?’ This echoes what he has said earlier in response to Peter’s claim that he would lay down his life for Jesus. ‘Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times. (13:38).’ As then, Jesus adds a prediction of what will actually happen. This will show that their believing is radically inadequate because it will be falsified by their actions. It fails the most crucial test of all.”¹⁷

16:32 “The hour of His greatest revelation would be the hour of their greatest failure.”¹⁸

Yet, God is gracious, forgiving and patient with us. We will fail. With the Spirit’s aid, we can learn from our failures. With the Spirit’s presence living through us, we can help others learn from their failures, as we exemplify God’s grace, forgiveness, and patience. Failures do not determine our future. Neither does the world or the evil in the world.

“They may have peace because, in spite of the world’s persecution or hostility, the world does not control their destinies any more than it has controlled Jesus’ life... Faith, directed by the Spirit, perceives Jesus’ death as his victory over the cosmic powers of death and darkness. As an instrument of execution and Roman subjugation of conquered peoples, the cross symbolizes defeat and shame. Through it, however, Jesus attains his victory over evil and receives glory or honor from God because through that cross God, out of his love for the world, brings life to the world.”¹⁹

Transformational Exercise

Grief is something we can all anticipate. Some losses may be due to powers beyond our control. Some losses, we must confess, are due to our own doing. Jesus was letting the disciples know that a major loss was about to happen. They could not control the loss. They could control their reaction to the loss. Jesus urged his disciples to not rely on their own strength or wisdom, but to rely on the Spirit.

¹⁶ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 242.

¹⁷ Ford, 324.

¹⁸ Tenney, 242,

¹⁹ Thompson 345.

A wise, retired high-school teacher shared this insight with our deacons recently: “When someone has experienced a sudden and unexpected loss, you may want to comfort them immediately. And they may blow up - with you as their target. Let them blow up. Let them cry, Let them shout. Let them be angry. But stay in a relationship with them. Do not let their initial reaction determine your future relationship. You don’t have to agree or disagree with what they may say - blaming others or even God, for example. Simply acknowledge the situation and their feelings. Maybe later you will have the opportunity to learn from them what they have learned from their loss. For now, be present. Be kind. Be loyal.”

How has someone’s presence, kindness, and loyalty helped you in a time of loss?

Close in a prayer something like this: *Jesus, our loyal friend. You warn us that we will face challenging losses. When those times come, through your Spirit, give us wisdom from your Word, give us presence through the faith community, give us hope and courage not based on our strength but from your Spirit. Amen.*