

An Absent Jesus and a Present Holy Spirit

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[0 : 0 0] Great. Good morning. I'm Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. Thank you so much for reading, Niamh. This is a wonderful passage of scripture. It'd be great to have it in front of you.

So if you haven't already opened it, get John chapter 16 open in front of you. And we're going to begin with a little game. We're going to play a game of Would You Rather. You might have come across the game Would You Rather before. It's very simple. I'm going to give you two options, and you have to choose which one you would rather. If you'd rather the first one, I'd like you to stand up. And if you'd rather the second one, you can stay sitting down. So the first one, really simple. Would you rather go on a hot holiday or a skiing holiday? Stand up if you'd rather a hot holiday. Most people, not that many skiers in the room.

That's great. You can sit down. Next one. Stand up if you would rather give up your mobile phone for a whole month or give up washing for a whole month. So stand up if you'd rather give up your mobile phone. Stay seated if you'd rather give up washing. Some disgusting people in the room.

Great. Sit down. Last one. Would you rather visit the International Space Station for a week or stay in a hotel at the bottom of the ocean, assuming that you have the ability to breathe and see, et cetera? So stand up if you'd rather visit the International Space Station. Sit down if you'd rather visit the bottom of the ocean. Slightly more split. That's about 50-50. Great. Okay.

You can sit down. You can sit down for this one. I won't ask you to stand up for this one. But this is really why we've just played that game and where we've been driving at. This question. Would you rather that Jesus were physically still with us or, as I guess is the case, that he were absent? Would you rather Jesus were here or, as is the case, that he was absent? See what Jesus said in verse 7 of our passage. Have a look at verse 7. He says, It is for your good that I am going away. Do you believe that? I mean, do we really believe that it is better for us that Jesus is no longer here? If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, maybe you've thought along these lines, something similar to this. If Jesus would just show up, like if God would do something incontrovertibly, conclusively, prove his existence, prove his goodness, if he'd just do that, if he were here, well then I guess I'd have to believe in him.

[2 : 4 5] Maybe if you're honest, if you're a Christian here this morning, you've even thought like that. Like this whole thing would be so much easier if he was just here with us. Maybe you've thought about how incredible it would have been to live at that time, to actually walk and talk with Jesus.

To see him healing the blind and feeding crowds of people. I mean, imagine being at the wedding where he turned water into wine. Wouldn't that have been amazing? Wouldn't that have helped us believe?

Wouldn't that have been better? But Jesus really does say that it is better that he would leave. That his having left really is better. Better for the apostles to whom he's speaking in our passage this morning and better for us. And I think our passage this morning is going to help us see why.

So why don't I pray for God's help once more before we do that together. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I pray so much this morning that you would speak to us by your Holy Spirit.

That you would help us to understand this morning why it really is better that Jesus is no longer here. Lord, as you speak to us, I pray that we would be encouraged and challenged by your word.

[4 : 10] that you would be building our faith this morning. In Jesus' name. Amen. And before we get to the answer to that question, why is it better that Jesus is leaving?

First, and really the first few verses of what Niamh read, we get a bit of a recap of where we've been as Jesus describes the sort of opposition that the apostles are going to face when he leaves.

And we're in this section of John's gospel. It's really Jesus' last words to his closest followers. And we saw with Ian a couple of weeks ago, Jesus saying to them, abide or remain in me.

Really reminding them that the only way that they're going to remain fruitful and faithful was by staying connected to Jesus, obedient to his teachings. He was beginning to prepare them for his absence, for what they were going to need to do.

And then just last week, we saw Jesus say that the world was going to hate them. Just as the world had hated Jesus with no good reason. As Graham put it last week, Jesus doesn't hide the small print.

[5 : 17] It's not going to be easy to keep on following him once he's gone. And then right at the end of the chapter, just briefly last week, we saw that wonderful promise that he would send the advocate or the helper, the spirit of truth, that he will send the Holy Spirit to help them do all of that as they faithfully bear witness about Jesus, as they continue to abide in him.

And so have a look at verse one of our passage this morning, chapter 16, verse one. What does Jesus say? He says, I have said all these things to keep you from falling away. And that, I think, is really Jesus's whole purpose in this section of teaching.

He doesn't want the apostles, those that he's speaking to here, to give up on him, even though the opposition that they're going to face is going to be serious. Here, we're going to get three ways that that opposition is going to be really serious.

And it's all leading to that question. Is it really going to be better when he's gone? At first, see opposition from within. In verse two, Jesus says they're going to be thrown out of the synagogue.

Of course, for many of John's first readers, those who were Jewish followers of Jesus in the first few centuries after Jesus died, they would have faced exactly that, being removed from the synagogue, which would have meant total alienation from their friends and their families, their entire communities.

[6 : 42] And you actually don't have to look far to see similar examples of this today. And I used to visit this guy in a nursing home. He was in his 30s. He was the youngest guy in the nursing home by at least 40 years.

But he was incredibly ill, mostly bed bound. He could get out and about a bit in his motorized wheelchair, but he was very ill. He was a Christian. And we used to take it in turns to go and collect him and walk him from his nursing home to the church, which was a terrifying job, to be honest, because he liked to think that his wheelchair was like a go-kart or something, rallying along the pavements on the way to church.

He had moments like that, real joy. But really, his life was just full of suffering, physical suffering like nothing I had ever seen before. And yet, despite that, if you asked him what hurt the most, it wasn't his back or his leg or whatever else.

If you asked him what was the most painful thing that he experienced in life, he'd tell you that it was because he was a Christian. He'd grown up in a Muslim home. And when he became a Christian, his family completely abandoned him.

They'd thrown him out. They refused to keep paying for his care. They left him utterly destitute and alone. He told me once that the only time he'd seen his father in the last five years, his father had come and offered him money to renounce his faith.

[8 : 04] That kind of opposition from within, from his own family. I wonder if we'd be prepared to face opposition like that. From our own families, from our friends, from those closest to us.

We might not have to. But if it came, what would we do as we follow Jesus? Jesus, he's warning his disciples here, the apostles, that their faith in him, it could well result in that kind of treatment, that kind of opposition from within.

But more than that, it may, still in verse 2, be opposition to the point of death. Just think again about the very first readers of this gospel, the early church.

Those who John must have had in mind as he wrote this. Those who had seen what had actually happened to some of the apostles. The apostles, some of them who had already faced death for their continuing to follow Jesus.

How important it must have been for those early Christians to read this, preparing them even for that kind of opposition. But we mustn't think that that sort of deadly opposition is simply a thing of the distant past, as though it was something that only the very early church faced.

[9 : 18] No, through every age in Christian history, faithful men and women have stood up in the face of opposition at the cost of their lives. Today, there are places all over the world where to be a Christian really is to risk one's life.

Are we so comfortable here that we've never asked, never had to ask, am I prepared even to die for Christ? If a terrorist were to walk through the doors at the back of this church right now, they took us one by one at gunpoint and asked us to deny Christ.

Am I prepared even to die for Christ? Opposition from within. Opposition to the point of death.

And lastly, it's opposition from the respectable. I see again in verse 2, opposition from those who think they're offering a service to God. The opposition that the apostles would face would be from good, moral, religious people.

Again, for John's first readers, that's exactly what they saw. Pharisees, if you know the story, like Saul of Tarsus, persecuting the early Christian church there at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyrdom.

[10 : 32] And today, there will be opposition to the gospel from those good, moral, secular creeds of the establishment, if you like. Maybe we already feel the pinch of that a little bit.

Just very ordinary, well-mannered, friendly people. Utterly opposed to the Christian gospel. Good, moral, upright people who would say they're on the right side of history, who think they're offering a service to society by opposing Jesus.

It's a very respectable-looking sort of opposition. And so given that that is what we face, right, the possibility of opposition from within, from our closest friends and families.

Oppositions that might well lead to our harm, maybe even death, as distant as that might feel to us today. All from a respectable opposition. Given that is what Jesus is preparing the apostles for here, and I take it, given that's what we are being prepared for too, how can we possibly say that it's better for him to go?

To return to his father in heaven and leave us to it, to face that opposition without him. How could that possibly be better? That's got to be the question growing in the apostles as they hear this last teaching from Jesus.

- [11 : 50] And Jesus knows that that's the question that's brewing. He says, see in verse 5, And I guess behind that question is a big why, isn't it?
- Not just where are you going, but why are you going? Why would you leave us? And none of them are actually asking that question, and they're not asking because in verse 6, they're filled with grief.
- Grief, I guess, because their best mate is going to be leaving them. But grief too, I guess, at what they're going to face. And that is all building towards this statement in verse 7.
- And we saw it right at the start. It is good for you that I am going away. Why? Well, have a look at the rest of verse 7. Unless I go away, the advocate will not come to you.
- But if I go, I will send him to you. Why is it better that Jesus is leaving? Because it means the spirit is coming. And the spirit coming is better by far.
- [12 : 51] We're going to see three reasons why that's true. Firstly, he reveals our sin. That's in sort of verses 8 to 11. He reveals God's words, verses 12 and 13.
- And he reveals Jesus in verses 14 and 15. So first, he reveals our sin. See what Jesus says to the apostles in verse 8?
- When he comes, that is when the spirit comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. Three things there that the spirit will prove the world to be wrong about.
- Sin, righteousness, judgment. They're all linked. We'll see they're all really about revealing sin. And he, Jesus, then explains them one by one. First in verse 9 about sin.
- This is really important for us today.
- [13 : 51] I think we often think of sin, don't we, as basically just the bad stuff that we do. Maybe more specifically, we might say the stuff that we do that contradicts what God has said.
- We may even go further than that and boil it down to something like rebellion against God or idolatry, worship of self or something along those lines. None of that is exactly wrong. But I think what Jesus says here gets us much closer to what the heart of sin is.
- People do not believe in me. All that other stuff that we might call sin, rightly, immorality, rebellion, idolatry, self-worship, all of that stuff, it all has its heart in unbelief.
- And specifically in a rejection of Jesus. I think we then get two ways that the Holy Spirit will show people their rejection of Jesus. First in verse 10, Jesus says to the apostles about righteousness, because I am going to the Father.
- See, Jesus, he was the perfect righteous son of God. He was the straight line that showed all other lines to be crooked, if you like. He lived in absolute obedience to his Father.
- [14 : 58] He was selfless and compassionate and loving and kind and gentle and zealous and just and merciful. He was the perfect picture of what it means to be truly human.
- And the benchmark to which the Spirit points to reveal their unrighteousness, their sin. As Jesus leaves, the Spirit is coming to help the apostles know that righteousness.
- Not a new righteousness, as though Jesus's wasn't complete. But as we'll see, to point them to him, to remind them of his glorious righteousness, which reveals their own lack in comparison.
- Do you see how the world is wrong about that righteousness, both then and now? Because the human instinct about righteousness is to create our own versions of what that means.
- We all hold ourselves to some sort of moral standard. And probably for most of us, desperately trying to stay on top of the zeitgeist. Trying to understand what culture currently defines as good.

[15 : 59] Doing our best not to get caught swimming against that tide. But whatever it is, whatever we think is good, without the Spirit, it will inevitably be divorced from Jesus's righteousness.

Without the Spirit, it is a rejection of Jesus and his way. But with the Spirit, that kind of worldly thinking will be shown to be wrong. As he reveals the sin of that self-defined righteousness.

And then finally in verse 11, about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. In other words, it's not the prince of the world's victory, but Jesus's.

The apostles must have desperately needed this word in the coming days. Because what he's talking about shortly after this is Jesus was arrested and beaten and mocked and hung on a cross. It looked so completely as though he was the one who had been judged and defeated.

His claims of being the Son of God squashed. Apparently the Messiah. Hanging there. Defeated and dying. Of course the world would see that and say, well there he is.

[17 : 12] Judged and condemned. And yet Jesus says, no. In that moment it will be the prince of this world. That is, Satan. He will be the one who in that moment stands condemned and defeated.

Satan who introduced sin and death into this world. He will be defeated. As Jesus takes the punishment for that sin on his shoulders. And smashes that death to pieces coming out the other side.

In that moment on the cross. Jesus looks most judged and condemned himself. But right there it is him. The perfect picture of victory. And so the spirit's coming doesn't just show us the cross.

But helps us to see it in that totally counterintuitive way. No longer just a human being hanging there dying. But it helps us see the cross in a way that reveals our sin.

Hammering in the nails. And Jesus winning a victory in our place. Over it for us. And so here's what the spirit has come to do. To reveal and convict us of our sin.

[18 : 19] Maybe you're here this morning and you're feeling that even now. As you reflect on your week or the last month. Or you look back over life. And you recognize that there are ways that your unbelief has led you down those paths.

I'm sure we can all think of times where we've missed the mark. However we might describe that. We've rejected Jesus. We've failed to live up to our own standards. Let alone his.

And ultimately in all of that we've misunderstood the cross. Even as I say all of this. It is the Holy Spirit who is illuminating those areas in your life.

Because that's his work. That's what he comes to do. Maybe as we've spent time looking at Jesus together over the last few weeks in John. Or as the Holy Spirit's been talking to us and pointing us to Jesus through letters to Titus.

And the Jacob story in Genesis last year. Through all of that as we've seen Jesus's righteousness. It's the Holy Spirit who has been revealing it to us.

[19 : 22] And ultimately as he's shown us in the moment of the cross. That wonderful victory. The place where we might go to see our sin defeated. And to find forgiveness and grace.

That's the Holy Spirit's work in us today. Do you see that that's better? That Jesus would go and that he should come? Because first he reveals our sin to us.

Secondly he comes revealing God's words. This is in verses 12 and 13. If you have a look at those with me. It says this. I have much more to say to you.

More than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes. He will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own.

He will speak only what he hears. And he will tell you what is yet to come. I want to just say a couple of things that these verses are not saying.

[20 : 18] Because there are those today who would take these verses and say. See we don't really need the Bible. All we need is the Holy Spirit. He'll speak directly to us. Jesus says here what he tells us will be true.

It'll tell us what's coming. We've got a direct line to God. No need for the Bible anymore. Sometimes more subtly than that. People will use these verses to say something like. See we don't really need church.

We definitely don't need preaching. And we certainly don't need our tradition. All I need is me and the Spirit. And yes my Bible. But it's better to assume.

That what other people have said about the Bible over the years is wrong. The Spirit will speak my truth to me. Through God's word. Yeah but directly to and for me. He helps me understand the Bible in a new and better and more relevant way for myself.

That's all I need. It's not what these verses are saying at all. See these verses they're not proof of a direct line to God by the Spirit for the Christian today.

[21 : 21] And they're not encouraging us to read the Bible in a way that ignores what Christians have said through the centuries either. Now see what these verses are saying. And remember who Jesus is speaking to here.

He's speaking to the apostles. That's his closest group of followers. And he's saying that when he's gone the Spirit will guide them, the apostles, into all truth.

He hasn't been able to say everything he wanted to say in the short time that they had together. There's more that Jesus has to say from God. But it's specifically for them, for the apostles. He's speaking of how they would teach the early church and especially of what they would write as scripture.

And actually that's really good news for us today. Given that most of the New Testament was written by the guys in the room when Jesus said this. We can trust that what they've written really is God's word.

That it comes with that authority. As we read and hear the words of this dusty old book. We're not simply reading the musings of men from thousands of years ago.

[22 : 25] But the very voice of God. Because he really does speak to us by the Spirit through the word, the Bible today. And that does mean that me and the Spirit and my Bible, that I can get wonderful benefit there.

And I ought to seek it. But it's a step too far to say that in doing that we should disregard the church, what other people have said, and our tradition through the centuries.

As if the Holy Spirit stopped illuminating scripture for a couple of thousand years and has just started speaking through it again today. No, he's been at work in every age of church history helping people to hear God's voice in the pages of this book.

We do well to understand what he's been saying, to learn from the wisdom of the ages. And so by the Holy Spirit, God's words are revealed to his church.

The Spirit reveals our sin. He reveals God's words. And finally, and most fundamentally, he reveals Jesus. At verse 14, Jesus says, He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.

[23 : 38] The Spirit glorifies Jesus. Notice how that works. We'll come back to it. But first notice how that works. It's because what the Spirit makes known to the apostles, that is, as he teaches them, enables them to teach the church and write scripture for us, it is Jesus speaking through the Spirit to them.

More than that, into verse 15. All that belongs to the Father is mine. What the Spirit makes known to the apostles, it comes from the Father via Jesus. Verse 13 says something similar.

He will not speak on his own, only what he hears. In other words, when we speak of God's words, we're talking about the triune God speaking. Father, Son, and Spirit working together, giving us their words through the apostles.

Why do they do that? Well, it's to reveal Jesus, to glorify the Son. And there's a really important principle in that for us.

You'll often hear this false distinction. People ask, I don't know if you get this question. It probably depends on the kind of circles that you run in. But some of my friends, Christian friends from down the years, they'll ask, is your church a Holy Spirit-led sort of church?

[24 : 50] Or more of a kind of Word-led sort of church? You see that that's just a ridiculous distinction? Because the Spirit is all about the Word.

And we wouldn't have the Word or be able to understand it without the Spirit. To be a Spirit-led sort of church is to be a Word-led church. And more than that, if you remember way back in chapter 1 of John's Gospel, we saw that God's Word was personified there.

It said, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And then a few verses later, the Word became flesh.

Because even as the Spirit speaks the very words of God, he's speaking about the divine Word of God, that is Jesus.

The Spirit is all about the Word and glorifying the Son through it. Actually, I think my friends who ask that question probably know that.

[25 : 53] And what they're really asking is whether or not the gifts of the Holy Spirit are front and centre of our experience of church. Making that the primary thing that the Spirit is about today.

The gifts of the Spirit, like tongues and healing, that kind of stuff. And whatever we think about the gifts of the Spirit, and whether or which gifts continue today, we actually have an upcoming evening series on the Holy Spirit that will be really helpful if you'd like to think through some of those things.

But wherever we land, we have to see that even those things, as the Holy Spirit is at work in the church today, whatever we say he's doing, he always does it to point to Jesus, the Word of God, to glorify the Son, to bring people to faith in Jesus, to grow people's faith in Jesus.

As soon as we divorce the work of the Spirit from that core principle, we've been led astray. And so when my friends ask that question, I say, yes, we are a Spirit-led church, because Spirit-led churches are being led to Jesus, being led to see him in all his glory.

So there's three things that the Spirit does today. Reveals our sin, reveals God's words, and at the heart of it all, he reveals Jesus. But maybe you're still left with that question.

[27 : 16] How is that really better? Wouldn't it still just be better if Jesus were here? Well, really simply, let me tell you a bit about the week that we've just had. Katie and I, we've been down in Peebles this week.

We were dog and house-sitting for some friends. It was brilliant. We barely cooked a meal for ourselves. We were out for lunch and dinner, basically, every day in different people's homes. And some of the people's homes that we were in have literally been there since the church, Peebles Evangelical Church, was founded just over 50 years ago.

And you know, that church, it's the least spectacular thing. A relatively small group of Christians meeting together week by week, full of the Holy Spirit, singing praises to the Son, with a very simple band accompanying them, coming to the bread and the cup, and remembering Jesus together as the Spirit works amongst them, to glorify Him, listening to God's words being spoken into their lives by the power of that same Spirit.

It's not spectacular. In many ways, it's incredibly simple. But it's His church, and it's beautiful. And as the Holy Spirit is at work, convicting people of their sins, speaking God's words to them, glorifying His Son, it's not spectacular, but it's utterly remarkable.

And it's completely spiritual. Spirit-filled worship. So would you rather that Jesus was still here? Well, it would be pretty incredible.

[28 : 45] But because He's gone, because He walked that path up the hill to Golgotha and was nailed to the cross, because He walked the path through death, because He paid the price for your sin and for mine in that moment, giving us a righteousness not our own, and then because He rose again and ascended to the Father, promising that we might one day do the same, essentially because Jesus is no longer here, all of that was making a way so that He could send His Spirit to live in us, that we might become His people, His church, revealing our sin to us, revealing His word to us, and glorifying Jesus for us.

It doesn't look spectacular, but it is really spiritual, and that really is better by far. Let me pray as the band come back up.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, I pray that You would make Your presence known to us by Your Holy Spirit this morning, that for each of us, You would be continuing to reveal our sin, our rejection of Jesus, the effects that that has had on our lives.

Lord, I pray that You would be lighting up those dark spaces in our hearts, our Lord, we're truly sorry for all the ways that we've turned our back on You.

Would You continue to speak a better word to us this morning? Would You speak of the wonderful grace that's available in Jesus? And would You glorify Him in us, that we might sing His praises together and delight in what He's done for us this morning?

[30 : 33] because we pray in His precious name. Amen.