

“Words Not to Stumble Over”

John 16.1-4

¹“These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. ²They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. ³These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me. ⁴But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.” [NASB]

HOPE
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I. Introduction

Last week, our text seemed to focus on the animosity of the world toward believers, and thus on our loss of friends in the world. But you must remember the reason for this loss is that *you have been gained* as a friend. I say it that way because Jesus called you friend, before you called Him friend. Jesus says the Father gave you to Him.^{Jn10.29;17.2,6,24} You were gained by Christ.

Intentionally—from all eternity—you were gained by Christ: God eternally decreed He would give you to His Son. Virtually—from His resurrection—you were gained by Christ: on the cross, He purchased you for Himself. Actually—from the moment you believed and trusted—you were gained by Christ: when His Spirit caused you to be born again, Christ brought you into actual spiritual union with Himself. Publically—from the Day of His Return—you will be openly seen and acknowledged as gained by His love for all eternity.

When you were gained by Christ, you were gained by Christ’s body (the Church) as well. Consider the myriads of saints (as well as angels) who rejoiced when you turned to Christ. Hear the hoopla and the cheers ricocheting all over heaven when Christ’s Spirit breathed life into your dead heart and you arose from the burning ashes into eternal living union with the Lord of heaven and earth! Yes, you lost what you thought were friends, but you were gained by—and you gained—a Friend who sticks closer than a brother. And in Him, you were gained by—and you gained—an uncountable host of faithful friends. Some of the friends you gained are still right here on earth, and some of them are sitting around you.

Remember that. But let’s be real. I know these words in John point to times and troubles that hardly seem befitting a season recalling the birth of joy. Yet these very words in John are here to carry you through the death of sorrow. And as there is no death of sorrow without the birth of joy, so too, there is no birth of joy without the death of sorrow. Now let us receive three lessons from these four verses.

II. Spoken Words Prevent Stumbling in Persecution

Number one. *Spoken words prevent stumbling in persecuting times.* ¹“These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling.” What does it mean, to “stumble”? Jesus gave a graphic image of such stumbling in His parable of the Sower and the Seed. There are those who hear the Gospel of Christ and immediately receive it with joy, but they are like rocks without much soil. They have no firm root in themselves but only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away.^{Mt13.21} “Fall away” is the same word that Jesus uses for “stumble.”

Again, He uses it more intensively in Mat.24 where He speaks of the days preceding His return.^{Mt24.7}“For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes...⁹Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.¹⁰At that time many will *fall away* and will betray one another and hate one another.” I think Jesus there is speaking of a permanent falling away or stumbling, which means, like the man without much soil, they never really had the Gospel take root in them in the first place.

It is possible, however, to stumble temporarily. Jesus told His disciples that they would so stumble.^{Mk14.27}“You will all fall away [stumble], because it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.’” Yet when the Shepherd arose after being struck down for our sins, He gathered His flock to Himself.

I don't think we need to debate whether Jesus has the temporary or permanent stumbling in mind here in John. After all, those who stumble in the temporary way, have no assurance they have not stumbled in the permanent way. If you fall away from vital, living faith in Jesus Christ, you have no reason to think you will return to vital, living faith in Jesus Christ. Only by returning, can you have assurance that He has gained you to Himself.

The point is, only by remembering, recounting, and relaxing in His Word, can you be kept from falling away in persecuting times. Spoken words prevent stumbling in persecuting times. Do you want to keep from falling away when it becomes more and more evident that those who are of the world—who you once thought were your friends—are actually your committed enemies? Then you need to remember, recount, and relax in the reality that Jesus has called you *friend*.^{14,15} Your accusers will line up against you, but your Advocate will cause their hurtful assaults to drop harmlessly to the ground.

Christ's spoken word prevents stumbling in persecuting times. Lay that word up in your heart now, so you have it then. Memorize it, obey it, practice it, live it. Spoken words prevent stumbling in persecuting times.

III. Presumptuous Service Satisfies Only the Gods You Know

Number two. *Presumptuous service satisfies only the gods you know.* ²“They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”

Being outcast from the synagogue meant being outcast from the community. That is an unhappy prospect. It buckled the knees of the parents of the man born blind, so they would not even support him when the Pharisees scorned his miraculous sight.^{Jn9.22} It silenced powerful rulers who believed in Jesus but loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.^{Jn12.42}

It is tough enough when the company for which you've worked long hours and years tells you, “We don't want you around here anymore.” Far worse is it when your spouse with whom you've shared love and companionship tells you, “I don't want you around me anymore.” Still, when those things happen, there are others around you to whom you can turn for direction, for comfort, even if you can't even bear the thought of being with anyone, and no words of comfort seem to get anywhere near your hurt.

But what if you didn't even have *that*? What if it not only seemed, but was openly advertised, that you had *no one* and *nowhere* to turn? Not only would there be no emotional comfort to be found... but there would be no help or provision of material, household, every day needs to be found from those you thought were your friends. And your troubles have only just begun.

Now they not only reject you... but they reject you ultimately. They say you are not worth the air you breathe; you are wasting the water you drink. You are spoiling their enjoyment of self-justified life by your witness to Christ. You'd be better off dead, in their minds. Or rather, they'd be better off if you were dead. You are an inconvenience and a real bother. But your troubles have only just begun.

Here is the real kicker: they justify themselves even in this. They persuade themselves that they are doing the right thing, the moral thing. And they name the God whom together you used to worship. They've barred you from the community. They've barred you from life. And now they would bar you from God. And they think they're doing God a favor. Listen, when someone thinks they are serving God by killing you, there will be no persuading them not to kill you. Just ask the Apostle Paul who explained to the Galatians, ^{Gal1.13}“I used to persecute the church of God

beyond measure and tried to destroy it;¹⁴ and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.” Paul was sincerely persuaded he was doing God a favor.

But Jesus adds a very, very important statement:³ “These things they will do because they have not known the Father or Me.” Paul was reduced to asking, “Who are you, Lord?”^{Act9.5} “I AM Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” You see, they presume to serve God, but they don’t even know God. Which means, they are serving a god they *do* know, rather than the God they do *not* know. The god they *do* know is a god that conveniently makes them feel important and powerful. The god they *do* know is a god that lets them think they are masters of the world.

The god they *do* know is a god that lets them think they can determine the viability of life. Unborn life. Infant life. Sick peoples’ life. Crippled peoples’ life. Old peoples’ life. Lonely peoples’ life. Faithful peoples’ life. Godly peoples’ life.

Jesus was 9 months unborn. Jesus was an infant. Jesus touched the sick. Jesus could barely walk with His cross to Golgotha. Jesus suffered eternity of age, and Jesus was alone—*all alone*—on that cross. And Jesus was faithful. Jesus, Yeshua, Messiah, Christ, was always God.

They knew their own god of self-justification, but they did not know God the Father, and they did not know God the Son who was born and laid in a manger, so that He might suffer all our sufferings. They knew their god of self-importance, but they did not know God the Father, and they did not know God the Son who was born of a woman and of a human nature so that He might *be* the Word who would keep you from stumbling and falling away. And Jesus says to them,^{Jn8.42} “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God...⁴⁴ You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.” They presumed to serve God, but the only gods they served were the gods they knew: namely themselves and their father the devil.

Which god do you serve? Do you serve God, or do you *presume* to serve God? Is your heart with those whom Jesus came to serve with His life and death? Is your heart with the battered reed and the smoldering wick, or are such people too inconvenient and better off dead? Jesus died for them. Is your heart with the orphan and the widow in their distress? Jesus died for them. Is your heart with the poor, the captives, the blind, the downtrodden, or are such too inconvenient and better off dead? Jesus died for them.

Is your heart with those who live godly, even when they discomfort us in light of our silly vanity? Or are such people too inconvenient and better off dead? Jesus died for them. Is your heart with those who mourn, who are gentle, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness? Or are such people too inconvenient and better off dead? Jesus died for them.

Presumptuous service satisfies only the gods you know. Are you serving God whose Son died for you? Do you know Him? Do you recognize His service for these whom I have mentioned? Is this the God you serve? He died for you, so that you might live for Him and serve Him. If this seems too inconvenient, then beware lest you stumble. Presumptuous service satisfies only the gods you know.

IV. Recalled Words Carry You Through Silence

Number three. *Recalled words carry you through the silence.*⁴ “But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.” The hour was

coming, and indeed now is, when Jesus is no longer with us in His Person. The infinite God-Man is in heaven, having risen from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. He has sent His Spirit, the third Person of the triune Godhead. The Holy Spirit lives in the hearts of those who believe in Jesus.

Yet this is a time of silence. God is not speaking now, for He *has spoken*. God spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways. In these last days *has spoken* to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.^{Heb1.1f} There is silence now, but we have His words which fill the entire universe, to carry us through this silence.

Though His words sufficiently fill the silence, they are hard to hear for all the violence. The hour of these things is coming and it is here. You need a baby; you need a man; you need a suffering Savior. You need the God-Man who suffered the severe violence of God’s wrath for your sins. You need Jesus Christ who was excluded so that you might be eternally included. You need His word: ^{Lk6.22}“Blessed are you when men hate you, and exclude you, and insult you, and scorn your name [“Christian”] as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. ²³Be glad in that day and leap *for joy*, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.”

The hour of these things is coming and it is here. Your testimony is inconvenient when you declare that Jesus is more than a good man and wise teacher. When you declare that Jesus is more than a baby who became a good man, you declare that stealing toy cars is more than “just something little boys do.” You declare that such stealing arises from a heart so wicked that it takes the Son of God to atone for it by His own death.

Your testimony is inconvenient when you declare that God Himself is the One who has determined and given value to the life of the unborn... and so great is their value that He sent His Son to die for the unborn, as well as for those who at some point took the life of their unborn into their own hands. Your testimony is inconvenient when you declare that God’s moral law... the 10Cs, are binding on all humanity for all time. Your testimony is inconvenient when you proclaim that He who came as a baby and died at the hands of unjust sinners like you and me, is the only One who can save us from our corruption and reconcile us to the Living God.

You need a baby; you need a man; you need a suffering Savior. You need His word: ^{Mt10.28}“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” You need His Word: ^{Rom8.35}“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... ³⁸I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The hour of these things is coming and it is here. Your witness is inconvenient in the eyes and ears of the world. You need a baby; you need a man; you need a suffering Savior. You need His word: ^{Heb12.3}“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

You’ve heard me speak of the suffering saints of 17th century Scotland. They believed that Jesus Christ was King and Head of the Church. And they believed that the civil king was king of the nation, but not the church. Those who stood up for this belief were put out of the Church. They were considered inconvenient. Powers even within the Church considered them better off dead. But such powers could not silence the inconvenient witness. Inscribed upon the gravestones of so many thus martyred we read: ^{Rev12.11}“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.”

The hour of these things is coming and it is here. Your witness is inconvenient. Do you believe that One who came as a baby can carry you through the silence? ^{1Jn3.1}“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.” The world may not know you and certainly cannot love you. But He who has gained you *does* know you and *forever* loves you. The only way, ultimately, that you can know this is to believe and receive and rest in what He has spoken. *Recalled words carry you through the silence.*

V. Conclusion

Beloved saints of God, I know these words appear unfitting for the season of year. But let not the downtown holiday trees, and rage suppressed 'neath frosty smiles, divert you from the birth of joy and the death of sorrow. Jesus was born in order that He might put sorrow to death. Nothing in the world or in the church can stop Him.

Your knowledge of God and His Son, dear Christian, is inconvenient to those who would say we all really believe the same thing albeit by different names. Your knowledge of God and His Son, dear Christian, is inconvenient to those who say the largest majority or the loudest voice is the only rule of society's choice. Your knowledge of God and His Son, dear believer, is inconvenient to a world committed to serving the beast and suppressing the Christ.

Stand fast, then, in the Word—namely Jesus—and you will find His Word will carry you through this day of silence despite all the world's violence. You have been gained by him, and nothing can snatch you out of His hand.^{Jn10.29} If your knowledge of God and His Son is inconvenient to the world... then rejoice, for you have heard *His* voice.