EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XVI. 1–7.

1 These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.
2 They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.
3 And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.
4 But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you.
5 But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou?
6 But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart.
7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you.

THE opening verses of this chapter contain three important utterances of Christ, which deserve our special attention.

For one thing, we find our Lord delivering a remarkable prophecy. He tells His disciples that they will be cast out of the Jewish Church, and persecuted even to the death:—“They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.”

How strange that seems at first sight! Excommunication, suffering, and death, are the portion that the Prince of Peace predicts to His disciples. So far from receiving them and their message with gratitude, the world would hate them, despitefully use them, and put them to death. And, worst of all, their persecutors would actually persuade themselves that it was right to persecute, and would inflict the cruellest injuries in the sacred name of religion.

How true the prediction has turned out! Like every other prophecy of Scripture, it has been fulfilled to the very letter. The Acts of the Apostles show us how the unbelieving Jews persecuted the early Christians. The pages of history tell us what horrible crimes have been committed by the Popish Inquisition. The annals of our own country inform us how our holy Reformers were burned at the stake for their religion, by men who professed to do all they did from zeal for pure Christianity. Unlikely and incredible as it might seem at the time, the great Prophet of the Church has been found in this, as in everything else, to have predicted nothing but literal truth.

Let it never surprise us to hear of true Christians being persecuted, in one way or another, even in our own day. Human nature never changes. Grace is never really popular. The quantity of persecution which God’s children have to suffer in every rank of life, even now, if they confess their Master, is far greater than the thoughtless world supposes. They only know it who go through it, at school, at college, in the counting-house, in the barrack-room, on board the ship. Those words shall always be found true: “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. iii. 12.)
Let us never forget that religious earnestness alone is no proof that a man is a sound Christian. Not all zeal is right: it may be a zeal without knowledge. No one is so mischievous as a blundering, ignorant zealot. Not all earnestness is trustworthy: without the leading of God’s Spirit, it may lead a man so far astray, that, like Saul, he will persecute Christ himself. Some bigots fancy they are doing God service, when they are actually fighting against His truth, and trampling on His people. Let us pray that we may have light as well as zeal.

For another thing, we find our Lord explaining His special reason for delivering the prophecy just referred to, as well as all His discourse. “These things,” He says, “I have spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.”

Well did our Lord know that nothing is so dangerous to our comfort as to indulge false expectations. He therefore prepared His disciples for what they must expect to meet with in His service. Forewarned, forearmed! They must not look for a smooth course and a peaceful journey. They must make up their minds to battles, conflicts, wounds, opposition, persecution, and perhaps even death. Like a wise general, He did not conceal from His soldiers the nature of the campaign they were beginning. He told them all that was before them, in faithfulness and love, that when the time of trial came, they might remember His words, and not be disappointed and offended. He wisely forewarned them that the cross was the way to the crown. To count the cost is one of the first duties that ought to be pressed on Christians in every age. It is no kindness to young beginners to paint the service of Christ in false colours, and to keep back from them the old truth, “Through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom of God.” By prophesying smooth things, and crying “Peace,” we may easily fill the ranks of Christ’s army with professing soldiers. But they are just the soldiers, who, like the stony-ground hearers, in time of tribulation will fall away, and turn back in the day of battle. No Christian is in a healthy state of mind who is not prepared for trouble and persecution. He that expects to cross the troubled waters of this world, and to reach heaven with wind and tide always in his favour, knows nothing yet as he ought to know. We never can tell what is before us in life. But of one thing we may be very sure: we must carry the cross if we would wear the crown. Let us grasp this principle firmly, and never forget it. Then, when the hour of trial comes, we shall “not be offended.”

In the last place, we find our Lord giving a special reason why it was expedient for Him to go away from His disciples. “If I go not away,” He says, “the Comforter will not come unto you.” We can well suppose that our gracious Lord saw the minds of His disciples crushed at the idea of His leaving them. Little as they realized His full meaning, on this, as well as on other occasions, they evidently had a vague
notion that they were about to be left, like orphans, in a cold and unkind world, by their Almighty Friend. Their hearts quailed and shrunk back at the thought. Most graciously does our Lord cheer them by words of deep and mysterious meaning. He tells them that His departure, however painful it might seem, was not an evil, but a good. They would actually find it was not a loss, but a gain. His bodily absence would be more useful than His presence.

It is vain to deny that this is a somewhat dark saying. It seems at first sight hard to understand how in any sense it could be good that Christ should go away from His disciples. Yet a little reflection may show us that, like our Lord’s sayings, this remarkable utterance was wise, and right, and true. The following points, at any rate, deserve attentive consideration.

If Christ had not died, risen again, and ascended up into heaven, it is plain that the Holy Ghost could not have come down with special power on the day of Pentecost, and bestowed His manifold gifts on the Church. Mysterious as it may be, there was a connection in the eternal counsels of God, between the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit.

If Christ had remained bodily with the disciples, He could not have been in more places than one at the same time. The presence of the Spirit whom He sent down, would fill every place where believers were assembled in His name, in every part of the world.

If Christ had remained upon earth, and not gone up into heaven, He could not have become a High Priest for His people in the same full and perfect manner that He became after His ascension. He went away to sit down at the right hand of God, and to appear for us, in our human nature glorified, as our Advocate with the Father.

Finally, if Christ had always remained bodily with His disciples, there would have been far less room for the exercise of their faith and hope and trust, than there was when He went away. Their graces would not have been called into such active exercise, and they would have had less opportunity of glorifying God, and exhibiting His power in the world.

After all there remains the broad fact that after the Lord Jesus went away, and the Comforter came down on the day of Pentecost, the religion of the disciples became a new thing altogether. The growth of their knowledge, and faith, and hope, and zeal, and courage, was so remarkable, that they were twice the men they were before. They did far more for Christ when He was absent, than they had ever done when He was present. What stronger proof can we require that it was expedient for them that their Master should go away.

Let us leave the whole subject with a deep conviction that it is not the carnal presence of Christ in the midst of us, so much as the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, that is essential to a high standard of Christianity.
What we should all desire and long for is not Christ’s body literally touched with our hands and received into our mouths, but Christ dwelling spiritually in our hearts by the grace of the Holy Ghost.

NOTES. JOHN XVI. 1-7.

1.—[These things...spoken...not...offended.] The chapter we now begin is a direct continuation of the last chapter, without break or pause. Our Lord’s object in this first verse is to cheer and revive the minds of the Apostles, and to prevent them being discouraged by the persecution of the unbelieving Jews. “I have spoken the things which I have just been speaking, in order to obviate the depressing effect of the treatment you will receive. Lest you should be stumbled and offended by the conduct of your enemies, I have told you the things you have just heard.”

Stier remarks that these things include both the warning of the world’s hatred and the promise of the witnessing Spirit. Foreknowledge of the world’s hatred would prevent the disciples being surprised and disappointed. The promise of the Spirit would cheer and encourage.

The word “offended” is literally “scandalized.” It is a remarkable instance of a word which has greatly changed its meaning since the last translation of the Bible, to the great perplexity and injury of many Bible readers.

How great a stumbling-block it often is to young and unestablished Christians to find themselves persecuted and ill-used for their religion, it is needless to point out. Our Lord knew this, and took care to arm the eleven Apostles with warnings. He never kept back the cross, or concealed the difficulties in the way to heaven.

2.—[They shall put...out...synagogue.] In this verse our Lord tells the disciples most plainly what they must expect. “They will excommunicate you, and cast you out of the Jewish Church, and expel you from their assemblies.” The Greek words are curious: “They will make you out-of-synagogue men.” How great a grief and loss this was to a Jew we have little idea, unless we have studied the work of Christianity among the Jews in modern times. Nothing affects a Jew so much as expulsion from the synagogue, or excommunication.

There is no nominative here to which we can refer “they.” It is an Hebraism equivalent to “You will be put out.”

Hengstenberg observes, “The disciples were not to depart voluntarily out of the synagogue, but to await what would happen to them on a full proclamation of the Gospel. This gives a very intelligible hint to the faithful in times of the Church’s decline: viz., that they should keep far from their thoughts the idea of arbitrary secession. The new formation is right only when the casting out has gone before.”

Calvin remarks, “We have no reason to be alarmed at the Pope’s excommunications, with which he thunders against us on account of the Gospel. They will do us no more injury than those ancient excommunications which were made against the apostles.” The curse causeless shall not come.” (Prov. xxvi. 2)

[Yea...time cometh...killeth...service.] In this clause our Lord warns the eleven that they must not be surprised if even death was the final result of discipleship. There would be no length of persecution to which their enemies would not go. “The hour comes when he who has killed you will think that in so doing he offers God an acceptable service.”

How true this has proved, the history of all religious persecution has abundantly showed. Who can doubt that Saul before his conversion was sincere? “I verily thought that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” (Acts xxvi. 9.) The persecu-
tions carried on in Spain, and Portugal, and France, and England, by Romanists against Protestants, are painful examples of the same thing. Men have actually thought that killing people was doing a holy and a good action.

The extent to which conscience may be blinded, until a man actually thinks that he is doing a godly deed, when in reality he is committing a huge sin, is one of the most painful phenomena in human nature. Many of those who burned our Reformers in the days of Queen Mary were sincere and in earnest. “Earnestness” is not the slightest proof that a man is right in his religion. It is one of the most monstrous idols of modern times. The folly of those who are content with “earnestness,” and say that all “earnest” men go to heaven, is abundantly shown by this text.

Ferus remarks that “good intentions and meanings are no better than impiety, if they do not spring from God’s Word.”

3.—[And these things will they do, etc.] Here, as in a former verse, our Lord points to blind ignorance as the true cause of the enmity of the Jews against Himself and His disciples. “They do not rightly know my Father, in spite of their professions of religious knowledge; nor Me, whom the Father hath sent. Hence they hate and persecute.” (See Ch. xv. 21.)

4.—[But these things have I told, etc.] Here once more our Lord repeats His reasons for telling the disciples what they must expect. “I have told you what treatment you will receive, in order that you may not be surprised when the time of trial comes, but may remember that I foretold you all, and not be cast down. Nothing unforeseen, nothing unpredicted, you will feel, happens to us. Our Master told us it would be so.”

The word “I” in the sentence, “that ye may remember that I told you,” is emphatic in the Greek. It seems to mean, “Remember that I myself, your Master, told you.”

Our Lord adds the reason why He had not dwelt on these trials before. “I did not tell you much of these things at the beginning of your discipleship, because I was with you, and would not disturb your minds with painful tidings while you were learning the first principles of the Gospel. But now that I am about to leave you, it is needful to forewarn you of things you are likely to meet with.”

Of course it cannot be said that our Lord had never and in no sense before this time foretold persecution and the cross to His disciples. But it must mean that He did not think it needful to dwell much on the subject, so long as He was with them and taking care of them.

5.—[But now I go ...whither goest thou?] These words seem to convey a reproof to the disciples for not inquiring more earnestly about the heavenly home to which their Master was going. Peter, no doubt, had said with vague curiosity, “Whither goest Thou?” (John xiii. 36); but his question had not originated in a desire to know the place, so much as in surprise that His Lord was going at all. Our Lord seems here to say, “If your hearts were in a right frame, you would seek to understand the nature of my going and the place to which I go.”

Let us observe that the disciples, with all their grace, were slow to use their opportunities, and to seek the knowledge which they might have obtained. They had not because they asked not.

Let us observe that our Lord spoke of His departure as a “going back to Him that sent Him,” His mission being finished and His work done.

6.—[But because...sorrow...your heart.] Here our Lord continues the reproof of the last verse. The minds of the eleven were absorbed and overwhelmed with sorrow at the thought of their Master going, and they could think of nothing else. Instead of seizing the little time that was left, in order to learn more from His lips about His place and work in heaven, they were completely taken up with sorrow, and could think of nothing else but their Master’s departure.
We should do well to mark how mischievous overmuch sorrow is, and to seek grace to keep it in proper control. No affection, if uncontrolled, so disarranges the order of men’s minds, and unfit them for the duties of their calling.

7.—[Nevertheless, I tell you the truth, etc.] In this verse we see our Lord mercifully condescending to show His disciples the necessity for His leaving them. It was expedient. It was for their good. It was for the real ultimate benefit of themselves and the whole Church that He should go away. If He did not go away the great outpouring of the Holy Ghost, so often promised, could not come down on them and the world. If He went away He would send the Comforter. If He did not go away the Comforter would not come.

There is undeniably much that is deep and mysterious about the contents of this verse. We can only speak with reverence of the matter it unfolds. It seems clearly laid down that the Holy Ghost’s coming down into the world with influence and grace, was a thing dependent on our Lord’s dying, rising again, and ascending into heaven. It seems to be part of the eternal covenant of man’s salvation that the Son should be incarnate, die, and rise again; and that then, as a consequence, the Holy Spirit should be poured out with mighty influence on mankind, and the Gentile Churches be brought into the fold, and Christianity spread over a vast portion of the world. This seems plainly taught, and this we must simply believe. If anyone asks “why the Holy Ghost could not be poured down without Christ’s going away?” it is safest to reply, that we do not know.

One thing is very clear. The universal invisible presence of the Holy Ghost in the Church, is better than the visible bodily presence of Christ with the Church. Christ’s body could only be in one place. The Holy Ghost can be everywhere at one and the same time.— Whatever the disciples might think, it was far better for Christ to go up to heaven, and sit at God’s right hand as their Priest, and send down the Holy Ghost to be with the Church till He came again, than for Christ to tarry with them as He had done.—Flesh and blood might have liked better to keep Christ on earth, eating and drinking, and walking and talking in Palestine. But it was far better for the souls of men that Christ should finish His work, go up to heaven, take up His office there in the holy of holies, and send down the Holy Spirit on the Church and the world.

Calvin remarks, “Far more advantageous and far more desirable is that presence of Christ, by which He communicates Himself to us through the grace and power of His Spirit, than if He were present before our eyes.”

Alford remarks, “The dispensation of the Spirit is a more blessed manifestation of God than was ever the bodily presence of the risen Saviour.

Bishop Andrews remarks, “We shall never see the absolute necessity of the Holy Ghost’s coming, until we see the inconvenience of His not coming.”

The expression, “I tell you the truth,” is a very solemn, emphatic one. It is like, “Verily, verily I say, whether you believe me or not, it is true.”

The expression, “I will send,” seems again to point to the equal procession of the Holy Ghost from the Son and the Father. In another place it is, “The Father will send.” Here, “I will send.”

After all no text throws more light on this deep verse than Psalm lxviii. 18: “Thou hast ascended up on high, and received gifts for men; that the Lord God might dwell among them.” These words surely point out that the Holy Ghost’s dwelling among men was a gift purchased by the Son.

Does not the verse teach us that those who make much of the “corporal presence” of Christ, so called in the Lord’s Supper, as a thing we should hold and believe, are in great error? There is something of far more importance to the Church, between the first and se-
cond advents, than any corporal presence of Christ, and that is the presence of the Holy Ghost. This is the real presence we should make much of, and desire to feel more. Our question should be not, “Is Christ’s body here?”—but, “is the Spirit, the Comforter here?”— Excessive craving after Christ’s bodily presence before the second advent, is in reality a dishonouring of the Holy Ghost. We should make much of the Spirit.

Ecolampadius remarks, “Those who try to defend an eating of Christ, or a presence of Christ, in the Sacramental bread, as if His body was at the same time with us and in heaven, are manifestly at variance with this text.”

Henry remarks here: “The presence of the Holy Spirit is a greater comfort and advantage to us than the presence of Christ in the flesh. Christ’s bodily presence was comfortable, but the Spirit is more intimately a Comforter than Christ in His fleshly presence; because the Spirit can comfort all believers at once in all places, while Christ’s bodily presence can comfort but few, and that only in one place at once. The benefit of Christ’s presence was great, but the advantage of the Spirit’s renovation and holy inspiration is much greater.”