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I Will not Leave you as Orphans

I am a survivor of EDD—Evangelical Deistic Disorder. For many years, I lived under the crushing weight of my belief in a mythical absent god. Sure, I held the hope that he would someday “come back,” but my day-to-day existence was dominated by the fact that he was gone.

Every time I sat down to read the Bible, I put on my EDD glasses. I saw the absent god everywhere, and nowhere did I see him more than in Jesus’ “Upper Room Discourse” in John 13-17. Here, Jesus fulfilled so many of my wildest deistic dreams, with his language of “going away” and “leaving the world,” someday “coming back,” and then taking us to be with him in that “away” place.

But since then the Holy Spirit has been grinding out new lenses for me. I’ve got new glasses, shaped not by Newton’s Great Clockmaker, but by Immanuel, God-With-Us. And now, Jesus’ supertime sermon looks very different, and I want to share with you what I see:

I used to see a Jesus who missed his far-away Father and was looking forward to being with him again. But I have now noticed that, as Jesus spoke these words in the Upper Room, he was in the same location he had always occupied; he was face-to-face with Abba. “My Father is with me” (16.32). “I am in my Father” (14.20). In the incarnation, the Son did not leave his Father’s side. Rather, he continued his life with Abba, but from within the limitations of being human (Philippians 2). This is important because his location at that moment is where he desires for us to be (14.3). Not in some faraway land called “heaven,” but in Triune relations finding expression in our humanness, now and forever.

When Jesus is “going” to his Father, we meet that paradox of the omnipresent Son of God being incarnate as a particular man at a particular place and time. For 33 years, the Son walked with his Papa by faith, not by sight. And now in the Upper Room, he is describing how he will soon walk by sight again, by the sight he had always had from all eternity: “Glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (17.1-5).

This is a journey from faith to sight, not from one location to another. Later, as Jesus prepares to ‘go away’ (into the clouds), he says “Surely I am with you always” (Matt 28.20). His ascension is not a departure so much as it is a shift in his mode of presence. Through his ascension, Jesus has not exited the universe but filled it. Hear Paul say plainly that Jesus “ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe” (Eph 4.10), the creation which he now “fills in every way” (Eph 1.23). Christ did not go away; rather, he began to be present with us in an even deeper way.

For a time, Jesus was present through his unglorified (limited) body. But now he will be present in an unlimited (glorified) way, through his Spirit (John 16.7). Which is more intimate?—the union of bodies or the union of spirits? For the first 33 years of his incarnation, his body was near a few lucky bodies in first-century Palestine. But now that he is ascended, it means that his Spirit is with the spirit of everyone, everywhere, for all time. The very core of God’s being is now and forever

with the core of our being. It is indeed a good thing that Jesus (the unglorified version of him, anyway) has gone away, and that the One who is now with us is the glorified Christ, present through his Spirit who “testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8.16).

After Jesus’ mode of presence shifted and intensified in this way, he ceased being visible to us in the normal way (16.10). We now see him by faith, while the world (those without faith) do not see him (14.17-19).

In this sense only can we speak of Jesus “leaving the world” (16.28; 17.6-19). But as the world comes to believe, they will say along with Jacob: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not” (Gen 28.16). As we come to believe, we discover a reality we didn’t know was there: “On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14.15-23). Note the future realization of a present-tense reality.

In the Upper Room, Jesus is looking forward to his journey from one mode of presence to another. After this journey he will not be seen (6.10). But notice that he also refers to *another* journey, one from which he *will* return to be seen by his friends sitting there at the table with him (14.23). The big trip he’s taking apparently includes a side-trip. He refers here to the necessary work of death and resurrection, the journey he must take before his journey of ascension. Hear his description of this journey:

He will “go away” “in a little while” (just a few hours, in fact). When he goes into the tomb, they will “see him no more.” They will “weep while the world rejoices.” Peter offers to join him on this journey into martyrdom. Jesus affirms that this will eventually happen, but not for awhile yet (13.36-38). Note that Peter rightly understands Jesus is here talking about his journey to the grave, not his journey to the Father’s right hand. Peter is asking to join him in death, not in ascension.

By entering death, Jesus will complete the work of including the human condition (even the dark pit of death) in the Triune life. By descending into hell and being raised, Jesus will accomplish his work of preparing a place for us in his Father’s house. But just “a little while” after Good Friday comes Easter Sunday: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... You will see me... You will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you... We will come and make our home with him” (14.15-23). “Your grief will turn to joy...and no one will take away your joy” (16.20-22).

With the Scriptures and the creeds, I believe in the future reality of Christ’s glorious appearing, when he will raise the dead, judge evil, and renew the cosmos. There are plenty of Bible passages that give us plain teaching on this (1 Thes 4.16-17; 1 Cor 15:23-27, 51-54; 2 Cor 5.10; Phil 3.20-21; Col 3.3-4; 1 Tim 6.14; 2 Tim 4.8; Titus 2.12-13; 1 Jn 2.28; 3.2). But John 13-17 is not one of them.

In our Father’s house are many rooms. By tasting death on our behalf, Jesus prepared a place for us there. His journey to the grave lasted only a little while; he came back on the third day. He did not leave us as orphans. Think about that—the Church is not a 2,000-year-old grieving orphan! Christ has returned from the grave and turned our grief to joy. We are not waiting for some day in the future when Christ will take us to be with him in his Father’s house. Because it was on that

bright spring day in 33A.D. when he ascended to his Father's right hand and brought us with him (Eph 2.6).

It was on that day when the Son of Man (and all humanity with him) mounted up on the clouds and came to the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.13). At the Father's doorstep, our elder brother proclaimed "Here am I, with the children God gave me" (Heb 2.13). And humanity now lives forever within the Father's embrace, where he blesses us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly realms (Eph 1.3). The Spirit is helping me realize that I am in Christ and he is in me and we are now together in the Father. They have come and made their home with me, and as I abide/believe in them, the Spirit's fruit is springing from my flesh. And no one can take away my joy.

In my Christian hope, there are many things I look forward to. But the presence of Christ is not one of them.

~ John Stonecypher