Jesus’ discourse about the coming age of the Comforter concludes with a paradox. He had been telling His disciples that His departure would be beneficial to them in many ways. To be specific, after He returned to His Father, they would comprehend Christian truth clearly and fully. In essence, this is what He said to them: “It is good for you that I go away. I cannot become visible to you spiritually until I become invisible physically. I have to be taken away from your physical eyes before I can be seen by the eyes of your minds.” So, He appropriately ended His discourse on the Comforter by repeating a riddle which He had given in a less direct way in His first farewell address. He said, “A little while, and you will not behold Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me...because I go to the Father” (Jn. 16:16-17).

Like all riddles, this one is very simple to unlock once we have the key. In Jesus’ paradoxical saying about losing and saving life (Mt. 16:25), the primary words (save and lose) are used in two ways. Likewise, in the text before us (Jn. 16:16), the primary word see is used in two ways. First, it is used in a physical sense. Then, in the second clause, it is used in a spiritual sense (“...you will no longer behold Me (physically); and again a little while, and you will see Me” (spiritually). Consequently, we have the possibility of the same event, namely, the departure of Christ to the Father, becoming a reason for not seeing (physically) and for seeing (spiritually). When Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples never saw Him again like they had seen Him in the room where they were having supper that night. But immediately after that time, they began to see Him in another way. A new understanding of His life sweetly crept into the eyes of their souls. The sight was so satisfying. It justified the glowing language their Master had used to talk about His departure prior to His leaving them. Though they did not see Him any more in His humanity, they believed in Him and, to use the words of the Apostle Peter, they “greatly rejoiced with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (I Pt. 1:8).

Before the ascension, however, the disciples did not have any idea of the vision and joy which awaited them. Their Lord’s words had no meaning for them. They were truly a riddle, even a contradiction to them. As the men stood around the inspired Speaker, they must have whispered to each other about the strange, baffling words He had just uttered about “a little while,” about “seeing” and “not seeing,” and about “going to the Father.” Evidently, the riddle served at least one purpose - it brought the disciples out of the numbness of their grief and, for a brief moment, awakened their curiosity. Nevertheless, that was just about all it did for them. It
surprised them but did not convey any meaning. Those who heard Him were forced to confess, “We do not know what He is talking about” (Jn. 16:18b). It must be noted, however, that they did not ask Jesus any questions. They wanted to do it at this point, but they did not feel the freedom. We believe they were restrained from speaking out of their respect for the noble and sustained way their Master had been addressing them during the second part of His farewell discourse. Jesus, however, detected a question by the look on their faces and kindly gave them a word of explanation (vss. 19-21).

**Sorrow Now, Joy Later**

His words, strictly speaking, did not explain the riddle. Jesus did not tell the disciples what the “little while” meant. Nor did He distinguish between the two different kinds of “seeing.” He allowed the puzzle to be solved through experience. That was the only way it *could* be solved. All He attempted to do was help them understand how His leaving, though at first causing sorrow, could bring joy afterwards. For this reason, He compared the crisis the disciples were about to experience, not to death (the time when a Christian makes his exit out of this world into a better one), but to birth (the event with which human life begins, vss. 20-22).

The comparison was appropriate for the intended purpose, but we cannot be absolutely certain about the meaning of every detail. Interpreters who aspire to understand all mysteries and all knowledge have raised many questions about the text, such as: “Who is represented by the mother in the parable - Christ, or the disciples? When does the sorrow begin, and when and how does it end?” The answers given to these questions vary. According to one interpretation, *Jesus Himself* is the new man, and the sorrow He alluded to was His own death which is to be understood as the redemption of sinful humanity. A second interpretation holds that Jesus was speaking about *His own disciples* as men who were with child, where the child represented a spiritual Christ who would be born when the Comforter came. Most people agree that the time of sorrow began with Christ’s passion (death). But there are many different opinions about when it ends. One view places the “joy date” after the resurrection. After a little while of painful separation, this event restored Jesus to His sorrowing disciples. Another puts the “little while” at Pentecost, when the Church was anointed by the Holy Spirit with power. Still a third makes the “little while” a “long while” by making the words “I will see you again” (vs. 22) refer to Christ’s second coming. This would be the blessed time when the new heavens and the new earth would finally come into existence, and righteousness, for which the whole creation groans, would dwell there (Rom. 8:19).

**Spiritual Illumination**

We do not think it is necessary to take a side on these disputed points. Neither do we think it necessary to give the analogy a doctrinal twist and find in it a reference to regeneration. What Jesus had in mind throughout this part of His discourse was not the new birth, either of the
disciples or of the Church. Rather, He was thinking about the spiritual illumination of the Apostles. He had in mind their transition from the chrysalis (cocoon) to the time when their wings were fully developed, from an ignorant implicit faith to a faith that was developed and intelligent. He was alluding to their initiation into the highest level of the Christian mysteries when they would clearly see things that had been unintelligible before. They would be Epopts in the kingdom of heaven [Note: Those who had been introduced into the highest (third) level of the Eleusinian mysteries (developed at Eleusis near Athens, Greece and associated with Demeter and the story of carrying off her daughter to the underworld by Pluto) were called Epopts]. For them, as for most Christians (there is a sense in which the experience of the Apostles repeats itself in the spiritual history of many believers), this crisis was just as important as the one in which people pass from spiritual death into life. It is a great thing to be regenerated, but it is equally important to be illuminated. It is a great and unforgettable moment when Christ first enters the heart as an object of faith and love. But it is an equally important moment when Christ departs, perhaps for a time, and leaves the mind clouded with doubt and the heart overcome with sorrow...until He returns, never to depart again, and drives away the wintry frost and darkness. In their place, He brings light, gladness, summer warmth, and spiritual fruitfulness to the soul. Truly, any person would be content for Christ, as he first knew Him, to depart, if he knew his sorrow would be turned into such joy after a little while!

Three Aspects of Spiritual Illumination

When Jesus used the familiar analogy of a mother giving birth, it aroused compassion. It demonstrated the possibility that the disciples’ sorrow would be changed into great joy. Then, in the next two verses, He proceeded to describe the characteristics of the state of mind the Apostles would possess before long (Jn. 16:23-24). First, He mentions a greater comprehension of truth. He referred to this when He said, “In that day you will ask Me no question” (vs. 23). He meant that they would not ask Him any questions like they had been asking all along, especially that night. Those were a child’s questions and were asked with a child’s curiosity and inability to understand the answers. The questioning spirit that children have would be replaced by the understanding spirit of adulthood. The truths of the kingdom would no longer be incomprehensible mysteries to them. The men would have an unction (anointing) from the Holy One and would know all things.

Some people think this would be too much to say about any Christian, even the Apostles, while they still lived on the earth. They argue that the day alluded to here is that of Christ’s second coming or of His happy reunion with His own children in the kingdom of His Father. Without a doubt, it is true that in that Final Day, only Christians will know as they are known (I Cor. 13:12) and will have absolutely no need to ask any questions. At that time,

‘Midst power that knows no limit,
   And wisdom free from bound,
The beatific (blissful) vision
   Shall glad the saints around.
(Editorial interpretation: In the presence of God's unlimited power and infinite wisdom, Christians who have gathered around the throne will have a blissful view of heaven that will give them eternal joy).

Nothing here on earth can ever make them that glad. Still, the statement we are considering presents a truth that is relevant to this present life. Compared to what we will be like in heaven, the clearest vision that any Christian can have is like looking in a mirror and seeing a poor reflection (I Cor. 13:12). In contrast to their ignorance as disciples, the degree of illumination that the Apostles received might be described, without exaggerating, as that of men who did not need to ask questions any longer. Jesus promised them that they would, before long, attain this high degree of illumination. In essence, He was saying that as Apostles, they would be teachers, not scholars - doctors of divinity, with titles conferred by Heaven itself. They would be capable of answering the questions of young disciples that were similar to the ones they once asked themselves.

The second aspect of the apostolic illumination that Jesus mentioned was unlimited influence with God through prayer. He spoke about this with great emphasis: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in My name” (vs. 23). This teaches that the Apostles were to have at their command the whole power of God, the power to perform miracles and heal diseases; to prophesy, that is, to foretell things that would impact the Church and things that the believers needed to know; the power of providence, that is, to make all situations subservient to their well-being and to the cause for which they labored. The substance of the promise - though not its miraculous elements - was made to all who aspire to Christian maturity and is fulfilled to all who reach it.

In the next sentence, Jesus (if we are not mistaken) spoke of a third feature of spiritual maturity to which He wanted His disciples to aspire: a heart that is enlarged to desire, ask, and expect great things for themselves, the Church, and the world. “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name” (vs. 24). There was a reason for this, and it was separate from the spiritual condition of the Twelve. The time had not yet come to ask anything in Christ’s name. They could not appropriately nor naturally make “Christ’s name” their plea until Christ’s work was completed and He was glorified. But Jesus meant more than this when He made His remark. He said what was absolutely true, that, before now, His disciples had asked for very little in any name. Their desires had been petty. Their ideas of what to ask for were unclear and crude. Any grand wishes they did have tended to be worldly. Therefore, God could not grant them. They had been like children. To a child, a penny seems greater to him than a thousand dollars seems to a wealthy man. Jesus hinted, but did not plainly say, that it would be different for the Apostles after the Comforter came. When He appeared they would be like poor boys who had grown into rich merchants whose ideas about enjoyment had grown larger as their outward fortunes increased.
When He appeared, they would be able to pray such prayers as the one by Paul in his Roman prison on behalf of the Ephesian Church and for the Church in every age. They would be able to pray the Lord's Prayer, especially “Thy kingdom come,” with full meaning, great desire, and an assurance of faith. Currently, they simply did not have any of these thoughts. In the past, they had been like children asking their Father to give them trifles, toys, pennies. Later, they would make large demands on the riches of God's grace for themselves, the Church, and the world.

Along with the enlargement of their hearts, Jesus promised they would have fullness of joy. What they requested, the Father would grant. And their answers to prayer would fill the cup of joy to the brim. Hope may be delayed for a time but, in the end, they would have unspeakable joy because of the hope that was fulfilled. “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full” (Jn. 16:24). This is what the Apostles actually experienced. They had the fullness of joy in the Holy Spirit, in His work in their own hearts, and in the world. This principle is still sound today. So why, then, is the cause of Christianity not progressing but, rather, one might almost say, declining? We must answer this question by asking others: How many people have enlarged hearts with great visions? How many long for sanctification and illumination, above everything else, with their whole heart? How many earnestly and passionately desire the conversion of those who are lost, long for the unity, peace, and purity of the Church, and the growth of righteousness in society at large? We are limited by our own hearts, not by God.

Near the End of the Discourse

The farewell discourse is now near the end. Jesus had talked with His disciples in the time allotted and told them what they were capable of hearing. He did not think He had provided much instruction for them, or that He had given them very much comfort. He had a very humble opinion about the impact of His words. Thinking back over all of His words, while especially alluding to what had just been said, He remarked, “These things I have spoken to you in figurative language” (Jn. 16:25). From Jesus’ perspective, He had given them a few parables or figurative sayings about the house of many mansions, about the Divine Trinity coming to live with the faithful, about the vine and its branches, and about the maternal sorrows and joys. This completes His discourse.

Jesus was conscious that his disciples could not fully comprehend this discourse, nor any of His past teaching. So, for the third time, He repeated the promise about a time in the future when they would have spiritual illumination. This time He spoke about Himself being the Illuminator and told them that the doctrine of the Father would be the great subject for illumination. “An hour is coming, when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father” (Jn. 16:25b). The hour referred to was the time immediately following the ascension. Shortly afterwards, the disciples would begin to experience the fulfillment of Philip's prayer, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (Jn. 14:8). They would understand
what their Lord meant about His going to the Father and realize what blessed rewards they
would receive. At that time, their exalted Lord would speak to them clearly by the Spirit of truth.
He would speak to them about these and all other matters. It would be clear in comparison to
His present mystical, hidden style. But it would not be too clear. In other words, it would not
contradict statements in other places in the Scriptures that teach all the spiritual knowledge that
one gains while on earth is only partial and dim.

God Hears Prayer
Jesus still had something else to say about the wonderful time that was coming. It was not some-
thing new; it was an old thing said in a new, incredibly kind, and sympathetic way. It had to do
with God hearing prayer. In essence He was saying, “When the day comes that you are enlight-
ened, you will not pray less than you have so far; you will pray far more, and you will use My
name when you want to be heard. I have already given you hints about this. Once more, let Me
assure you that you will be heard. To support what I am saying, I am reminding you that I will be
in heaven with the Father and will always be ready to speak a word on your behalf, saying, ‘Fa-
ther, hear them for My sake, whose name they plead in their petitions.’ But I do not insist on this.
For I do not believe you need to be assured of my continued interest in your well-being. Another
reason is that My intercession will not be necessary. My Father will not need to be begged to hear
you, the men who have been with Me through all of My trials (Lk. 22:28), who have loved Me
with all of your hearts, who have believed that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God, while
the world at large has regarded Me as an impostor and a blasphemer. Because of the things you
have done for His Son, My Father loves you, is grateful to you and, in a sense, considers Himself
a debtor to you (Jn. 16:26-27). What heart, what humanity, what poetry is in all of this! Poetry,
and also truth - truth that is unbelievably comforting, not only to the Eleven faithful compan-
ions of Jesus but to all sincere believers in Him.

True Faith
Jesus alluded to the faith of His disciples. He praised it because it was so rare. As He brought
His discourse to an end, He used the occasion to declare how true their faith really was. “I came
forth from the Father, and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again, and going to
the Father” (Jn. 16:28). The disciples only believed the first part of this statement. They didn't
understand the second part yet. But Jesus put both parts together like two halves of one whole
truth. Either one, by necessity, implies the other. The declaration is most significant for it sums
up the history of Christ. It is the substance of the Christian faith. It asserts doctrines that are
totally incompatible with a humanistic view of Christ's person and makes His divinity the fun-
damental article of the creed.

These last words of Jesus burst on the disciples like a star suddenly shining out through a break
in the clouds on a dark night. At last! One bright utterance had pierced through the haze of their
Master’s mysterious discourse, and they believed they understood its significance. Jesus had just told them that He came forth from the Father into the world. Now they understood that and, because they believed it, they had become disciples. They were delighted that they had heard something to which they could give a positive response. So, they made the most of it and informed their Master that His understandable, plain speaking, and their intelligent comprehension (which He had told them would not come until sometime in the future) already existed. “Lo,” they said, with an emphasis on the temporal particle, “now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God” (Jn. 16:29-30).

How impossible it is for children to speak in any other way than as children! Just when the disciples claimed to have knowledge, they betrayed the fact that they were ignorant. The statement that begins with the second “now” (vs. 30) reveals an almost ridiculous misunderstanding about what Jesus had said about their asking Him no questions after their enlightenment. He meant they would not need to ask questions as learners. They thought He meant He had no need to be asked questions as to who He was and from where He came. They had already admitted that Jesus’ claim that He had come down from heaven was true. And as to the inference the disciples made from that statement (“by this we believe” - vs. 30), we admit we cannot make anything of it. After many attempts to understand the logic of the disciples, we must confess that we are totally baffled. The only way we can make sense of these words is to regard the phrase translated by “this” (vs. 30b) as an adverb of time and to have it mean “at this present moment.” The rest of the sentence would then have this meaning: “Meanwhile, whatever additional light may be in store for us in the future, we believe, even now, that You came forth from God.” This translation, however, is not favored, or even suggested, by any of the critics.

The disciples honestly believed what they professed to believe. This was a fact. Jesus had just acknowledged this. But they did not understand what was involved in their belief. They did not comprehend that Jesus’ coming from the Father implied He would go there again. They had not understood that truth at the beginning of the discourse, nor did they understand it when the discourse was finished. They would not understand it until their Lord had left and the Spirit had come. He would make all things clear. As a result of their ignorance, their faith would not carry them through the evil hour that was now very close. The death of their Master, the first step in the process of His departure, would take them by surprise and make them flee panic-stricken like sheep attacked by wolves. Jesus plainly told them this. “Do you now believe?” (Jn. 16:31). He said, “Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32).
**Jesus’ Consolation as He Faces Death**

It was a sobering announcement. But no matter how difficult it was, Jesus was not afraid to look death in the face. His heart was at perfect peace because He had two great things to console Him. First, He had a good conscience. He could say, “I have overcome the world” (vs. 33). He had kept His moral integrity as He was confronted by endless trials. The prince of this world could not find any of his spirit in Him and, for that very reason, determined to crucify Him. But by moving in that direction, Satan would not nullify but would, instead, seal Christ’s victory. Defeating Jesus outwardly by using worldly power would become the index and measure of His spiritual conquest. The world knew very well that putting Him to death was only the second best way to defeat Him. His enemies would have felt better if they had succeeded in intimidating or bribing Him to compromise. The ungodly powers of the world always prefer corruption to persecution as a means of getting rid of truth and righteousness. It is only after they fail in their attempts to ruin the conscience and make people sin that they turn to violence.

The second source of consolation for Christ, as He faces death, is the approval of His Father: “I am not alone, because the Father is with Me” (Jn. 16:32b). The Father had been with Him all along. On three critical occasions - at His baptism, on the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the temple a few days before - the Father had encouraged Him with His approving voice. So Jesus still believed that the Father was with Him. He fully expected that He would be with Him when He was deserted by the ones He had chosen and when He went through the awful crisis that was to come soon. He knew He would be with Him when He entered that darkest, bitterest moment, when He could no longer feel His Father’s presence and cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Mt. 27:46). He expected His Father to be with Him then, not to save Him from the feeling of desertion (He would not want to be saved from that, for He had to experience the most painful of all sorrows so that He could be like His brothers and be able to minister to them when they were in despair), but to sustain Him under the agonizing affliction and enable Him with the faith of a son to cry out, “My God” even when lamenting about being forsaken.

**You, Too, Have Overcome the World**

Since Jesus was free from all worry for Himself, He was able to tell His disciples to be encouraged. He was able to do this for the same reason He was without fear - because He had overcome the world. He wanted them to understand that His victory was also theirs. In essence He told them, “Take courage, I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Therefore, so have you.” This is His meaning. Socinians would interpret the words differently. They would understand them this way: “I have overcome the world. Therefore, you will be able to as well. Follow My example and courageously fight the battle of righteousness, in spite of your tribulations.” This meaning is good, as far as it goes. It does give courage to people for the battle of life to know that the Lord of glory has been through it before them. It is an inspiring thought to know that He has even been a soldier. For who would not follow the divine Captain of salvation when He leads them through
suffering to glory? So, when we think that this great Soldier has been completely victorious in
the fight, His example becomes even more encouraging. His victory demonstrates that the god
of this world is not all-powerful. Therefore, it proves that anyone has the power to overcome
Satan simply by being willing to bear the cross. As Jesus’ followers look at Him enduring His
sufferings at the hands of sinners until He dies and despising the shame of the crucifixion, they
get more courage to fight the good fight of faith.

**Jesus Christ, Our Representative**

However, while this is true, it is the smallest part of the truth. The greater fact is that Christ’s
victory is the victory of His followers and insures that they will also conquer. Jesus fought His
battle, not as a private person but as a public figure, as a representative for every person. And
everyone is welcome to claim the benefits of His victory, such as the pardon of sin, the power to
resist the evil one, and admission into the everlasting kingdom. Because Christ has overcome,
we may say to all people, “Take courage.” The victory of the Son of God in His human nature is
an available source of consolation for all who partake of that nature. It is the privilege of every
person (it is also a duty) to acknowledge Christ as his representative in this great battle. “The
Head of every man is Christ.” Everyone who sincerely recognizes this relationship will receive
the benefits of it. If you truly claim to be related to the High Priest, you will receive from Him
mercy and grace to help you in your hour of need. Take heart. We are not isolated units, fighting
our own battles without help or encouragement. We are members of one another and, above all,
Christ is our elder brother. We at least have a human relationship to Him, if we do not have a
regenerate one. Therefore, we ought to look to Him as our Head in all things. As our King, we
ought to lay down the weapons of our rebellion. As our Priest, we ought to receive from Him the
pardon of our sins. As our Lord, we ought to be ruled by His will, defended by His might, and
guided by His grace. If we do this, the accuser of the brothers will have no chance of prevailing
against us. The words of St. John in the Apocalypse will be fulfilled in our own personal history:
“And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their
testimony; and they did not love their life even to death (Rev. 12:11).”