



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA

By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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Matthew 17:9–13, 22–23
Version

January 26, 2014
English Standard

“The Kingdom Prophecy”

The 59th Sermon in a series on the Gospel of Matthew entitled
“The King and His Kingdom!”

Matthew 17:9-13, 22–23

“And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, ‘Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.’”¹⁰ And the disciples asked Him, ‘Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?’”¹¹ He answered, ‘Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.’¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”¹³ Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them of John the Baptist. ...²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men,²³ and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.’ And they were greatly distressed.”

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You have brought us to this amazing Gospel to learn more about your Son, Jesus. We ask You this morning to give us the grace to understand Your hard teaching here. Help us to understand why You keep telling us about Your suffering and death. Help us to understand what it means for living the Christian life today. So by Your Spirit open this Gospel to us and help us to see Jesus, and, as always, for this we need Your grace. Give us the desire to learn from You this morning, in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: “*The Tikker Death Watch*”¹

In 2005, Steve Jobs told a class of graduating students at Stanford University, “for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’” The idea that we should live each day like it was our last isn’t new, of course, and is supposed to inspire us to, you know, go sky-diving, Rocky-Mountain climbing, and the like. But how would you live this day if it wasn’t your last, but rather the 19,718th-to-last? Or the 8,657th-to-last?

A new watch called **Tikker** claims to have created a way to calculate approximately when, according to its creators, a person is likely to die, and then to input that date into a wristwatch. Rather than telling the hour and minute, this new watch counts down the years, months, days, hours, minutes and seconds of a person’s life. As Olga Khazan of *The Atlantic* explains, Tikker projects the wearer’s time of death based on a medical history questionnaire. Then the countdown begins. The idea is that being constantly reminded of his or her own mortality will nudge the wearer to live life to the fullest. By motivating wearers to “make every second count,” the creators of the death watch aim for no less than “to make the world a better place!”

From their website: “While death is nonnegotiable, life isn’t. The good news is that life is what you make of it – and it can be beautiful! ... Tikker is a wrist watch that counts down your life from years to seconds, and motivates you to make the right choices.” The company, which is a Kickstarter-project-turned-real-thing, writes on its site, “Tikker will be there to remind you to make most of your life, and most importantly, to be happy.” All we have to do is learn how to cherish the time that we’ve been given, to honor it, suck the marrow from it, seize the day and follow our hearts. And the best way to do this is to realize that seconds, days and years are passing ... **never to come again**. And to make the right choices. “Get Happy, I tell you! Quick, you only have 57 years, 6 months, and 23 seconds left! Get happy, for Pete’s sake!”

The watch has helped the “Tikker team” create a bucket list, which includes items like, “Perpetually lay on a beach,” “Quit my job and watch every movie I always wished I had watched.” And of course, “Tell the girl at the coffee place that I love her.” *Hey, Coffee Place Girl, would you like to spend the next 473,354 hours with me? We’ll be watching old movies on the beach. Also, it’s looking more like 60 hours now because I can no longer buy food since I quit my job.*

Tikker might be the newest example, but such tokens of mortality are as old as the ancients. Reminders of the inevitability of death — called *memento mori*, which means, “remember that you will die” — are found throughout the ages in various forms: poems, dances, paintings, etchings, pendants, sculptures, pictures and chapels of bones. In the late medieval period, when the Black Death took the lives of half the people in some populations, the allegorical ritual of the Danse Macabre (“Dance of Death”) emerged: a personified **Death** marched with participants to the grave; Still seen today in New Orleans, it’s a somber but playful reminder that death comes to all and quickly to many.

Such tokens of mortality are as old as the ancients. During the Victorian age, when photography was newly fangled, photos of the recently deceased became a common *memento mori*. And so the forms of our *memento mori* have evolved from organic (bones, poems and

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the articles “*What The Tikker Death Watch Reveals About Modern Mortality*” by Dr. Karen Swallow Prior, 1/22/14, <http://thinkchristian.reframemedia.com> and “*This Watch Tells When You Will Die*” By Olga Khazan, 1/6/14, www.theatlantic.com.

dances) to mechanic (photographs and death watches). But while the modes may change, our need to remind ourselves of our mortality is not new. The Psalmist implores, **Psalm 39:4**, “*O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!*”

This prayer is what Tikker hopes to address. “Imagine someone told you that you only had one year left to live,” the website for the watch proclaims. “How would that change your life?” But, alas, Tikker’s *carpe diem* mission is merely mortal: “Tikker will be there to remind you to make most of your life, and most importantly, to be happy. Remember, it’s not really about how much time you have, it’s what you do with it. ... Wearing a Tikker is a statement to the world that your biggest priority in life, is living.”

But if you’ll bear with me for a just a few of your remaining 28.4 million moments, there are a few caveats. Insurance and retirement companies already use “death clocks” that aim to calculate longevity, but there’s evidence that their estimates vary widely, even for the same individual, and there’s a 50 % chance you’d outlive your deadline. There’s of course, also a chance that, like Narcissus, you will become so distracted by your Tikker’s elegant beauty (or actuarial precision) that you’ll cross the street without looking and **get hit by a bus**.

The Psalmist sees a different purpose for keeping our mortality in front of us, **Psalm 89:47**, “*Remember how short my time is! For what vanity You have created all the children of man!*” For the real measure of our days is not against the clock, but against eternity.

What does that have to do with Matthew 17? Quite a bit actually. You see, Jesus certainly didn’t have a Tikker Death Watch, but He really didn’t need one, because **He knew what was coming**. **He knew** that suffering and death were in His near future ... and some passages imply that **He knew**, not only **when** this would happen, but the who, what, where, why, and how as well.

Often when preaching through the Gospels, we talk about the “**already and not yet**.” With Christ’s earthly ministry, some things have **already** arrived and some things have **not** happened **yet**. Also in our earthly lives, some aspects of the kingdom are presently here – the “**already**,” and some aspects of life in the kingdom haven’t begun yet – the “**not yet**.” We don’t **receive** it all, and we don’t **understand** it all, and we don’t **get** it all — this side of heaven. All of the Christian life has parts that are “**already**” in place, and parts that are “**not yet**” in place. And it was no different in Jesus day. And **knowing** that helps us to understand this passage, because it immediately follows the Transfiguration, the demonstration of the Glory of God in the person of Christ. And through this filter of the “**already and not yet**” we can see how the disciples respond and react, and how we’re supposed to respond and react. And so we start with the ...

v. 9: **NOT YET** ²

2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books, *The Reformed Expository Commentary: Matthew, Volume 2* by Dr. Dan Dorani, pages 113–114; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16–23*, by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 70-86; and *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1* by Dr. James Montgomery Boice, pages 271ff; **And the Sermons, “*Jesus on the Mount; Jesus off the Mount*” by Dr. Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 7/2/06, sermons.redeemer.com; Logos Bible Software 4: *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*; “*Kingdom Citizens as Citizens of this World*” by Dr. Phil Newton, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, 5/30/04, www.southwoodsbc.org; and “*Elijah’s Second Coming, Impotent Disciples, and the Miracle of the Tribute Money*” by Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Believers Chapel, Dallas, TX, www.sljinstitute.net.**

“And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

On the way down the mountain the next morning, Jesus told the disciples to keep quiet about what they had seen until after the resurrection. The reason is obvious. He didn't want them to relate stories that would fan a misguided expectation of a political messiah. He needed to go to the cross before the nature of His work could be fully known.

But, as you can imagine, it must have been **extremely difficult** for the three disciples to keep this glorious vision to themselves. They were probably bursting at the seams to tell everyone else ... at least to tell the other disciples. But just as Jesus had told the Twelve in the last chapter, **Matthew 16:20**, *“Then He strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ.”* So now He tells the Three to tell no one of His manifestation of glory.

You see, the Christ that most Jews of that day were expecting was not the Christ who had come. They had read the Old Testament enough to know that it promised there'd be a kingdom of God on the earth, and that Israel would be returned to the head of the nations. And they were looking forward to that time, for they were currently under **Roman** oppression, which followed the **Greek** oppression, which followed the **Persian** oppression, which followed the **Babylonian** oppression, which followed the **Assyrian** oppression, and all in all, they were getting pretty sick of being under oppression. They couldn't **wait** for the prophecies to be fulfilled, for the Christ to come, when they would become the head of the nation's again, and would rule and reign with the Messiah.

They had overlooked the fact that in the Old Testament it was also stated that the Messiah, when He came, would offer a work of **redemption** and have to **suffer** and **die** for sin. They had, in effect, laid stress upon the **glory**, but they had omitted the **suffering**, and consequently they were looking for a political kingdom, and particularly, for a political kingdom **without the suffering, without the cross.**

And our Lord knew that instead of coming to conquer, He had come to die. Instead of coming in divine glory, He came in humble meekness. And instead of coming to deliver the Jews from political bondage, He came to deliver from sin's bondage all who would trust in Him. For the people to have learned about the Transfiguration would only have incited them to try to make Jesus into a worldly king to fulfill their worldly expectations. So He warned the disciples not to say anything about what they'd seen on the Mount of Transfiguration. But when they'd hear the story after He had risen from the dead, it would be clear that He had not come to conquer the Romans but to conquer death.

So what's going on now? What's the ...

v. 10–13: ALREADY

¹⁰ *And the disciples asked Him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”* ¹¹ *He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things.* ¹² *But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”* ¹³ *Then the disciples understood that He was speaking to them of John the Baptist.”*

Now, put yourself in the place of the disciples. They have just seen something that's absolutely incredible, and they're still trying to process it ... wondering, “What in the world did we just see?” And then Jesus tells them to be quiet about it. Clearly, they don't get it. And so the disciples were still puzzling over what they had witnessed, and they countered with a question.

They had seen Elijah with Jesus, and this caused them to wonder about Elijah's role as the Messiah's **forerunner**, which was prophesied in the very last verses of the Old Testament. These verses say, **Malachi 4:5-6**, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*"

These verses were used by the teachers of the law to say that Elijah had to come before the Messiah, as His **forerunner**. But how could that be if the Messiah, whom the disciples now believed Jesus to be, was already here and was about to consummate his work?

The disciples' question can be taken in two ways.

1. *As A Chronological Problem.*

If you are the Messiah, what about Elijah? How can you be the Messiah if the teachers are right when they say that Elijah has to come first? How is this to be explained? Most people who read these accounts take the disciples' question this way because of the word *first*, which suggests the problem with the sequence.

2. *As A Theological Problem.*³

This understanding of the question comes from the anticipated nature of the prophet's ministry. Malachi taught that Elijah would bring about the restoration of all things. But if Elijah was to do that, bringing the people to a right relationship with God as a precondition of the Messiah's coming, how was it that the Messiah would need to die? Who would reject Him in such a happy age? The theologian, Dr. D. A. Carson, holds to this idea, saying, "Their confusion was not **merely** chronological — who must come first — rather, it referred back to their fundamental inability to make sense of the combination of **glory** and **suffering**. At this stage, their witness of the transfiguration glory of Jesus had if anything confirmed them in their [misunderstanding]." Whatever their question meant, both these puzzles were answered when Jesus replied, starting at verse 11, "*Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.*"

This means that the scribes were right to insist that Elijah must come before the Messiah, but they were wrong in failing to see that he, in fact, **had already come**. They were wrong in their interpretation of the restoration too. They understood this as a promise of a perfect messianic age. But that was not a given fact, even in Malachi, since the last verse says that if the people do not repent at Elijah's teaching, then God will return "*and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*" Since Jesus is making clear that the work of Elijah had been done by John the Baptist and that the people had not repented at his teaching, the only thing they could reasonably expect from God now was this judgment.

We already know that John the Baptist was functioning in the role of the **forerunner** prophet, the future Elijah, because the angel told this to Zechariah in **Luke 1:16-17**, "*And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before Him **in the spirit and power of Elijah**, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*" And Jesus had earlier said, **Matthew 11:14**, "*and if you are willing to accept it, **he is Elijah** who is to come.*"

³ D. A. Carson quote comes from his book *God With Us: Themes from Matthew*, page 106.

However, since the leaders had mistreated and killed John the Baptist, why should Jesus expect any different treatment? By calling their attention to this pattern, Jesus was reinforcing His teaching that it was necessary for Him **to suffer and die**. This was the second most important thing He had to teach them after He had taught who He was. **First lesson — Matthew 16:15-16**, “*He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”*”¹⁶ *Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Peter, James, and John had been given a glimpse of glory on the mountain, just as we have been given a glimpse of future glory in the last chapters of the Book of Revelation, but that is for later.

What is needed now is that the followers of Christ deny themselves, take up their crosses daily, and follow Him. Before glory there must always be a cross, there must always be **suffering**. **Second Lesson — Matthew 16:21**, “*From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and **suffer many things** from the elders and chief priests and scribes, **and be killed**, and on the third day be raised.*” The Gospel of Luke says that on the mountain Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus, **Luke 9:31**, “*who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, [His suffering and death] which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*” So when the voice said, “**Listen to Him**,” one thing involved was their need to listen to what He had to say about His death and its meaning.

And you either understand that **suffering** and **death** is the road to glory, or you don't. And it's clear, since Jesus tells us this five times in Matthew, that the disciples weren't getting it, they weren't understanding it, they were ...

v. 22–23: MISSING THE LESSONS

²² *As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men,* ²³ *and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed.”*

So we have this interesting conversation about Elijah? Do you know what it's about? Do you remember how in chapter 16, when Jesus first tells them, “I'm the Messiah, but I'm going to suffer and die,” Peter goes crazy? He says, “Wait a minute. No way! That's not the program. We go from strength to strength, and we put down our enemies.” He rebukes Jesus, and Jesus rebukes him, saying, **Matthew 16:23**, “*Get behind Me, Satan! You are a hindrance to Me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*”

The declaration of Jesus Christ in His person and work establishes the foundation for eternal citizenship in God's kingdom. And what is this gospel? It is the truth that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became part of the human race so that He might die in our place, bearing God's judgment against us, be buried in a tomb, and then three days later rise from the dead to demonstrate that God accepted His sacrifice for us, and that sin, death, and Satan has been eternally conquered. Upon this foundation rests our citizenship in God's kingdom.

Every detail that Jesus explained bore importance in establishing the basics of the gospel. “**The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men,**” shows both the guilt belonging to humanity and also magnifies the grace of God. Submitting to the Father's design, Jesus willingly yielded Himself to the betrayal and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Though Judas served as the betrayer, the Jewish religious leaders as the accusers, and the Romans as the executioners, all of us share in the guilt of His death. Here we find the mercy and grace of God magnified by the fact that the eternal Son of God yielded Himself to the hands of men so that our sin and guilt might be removed. This same Son of God endured the suffering and agony of death

to glorify God the Father who purposed to forgive sinners and bring them into relationship with Himself.

“And they will kill Him,” Jesus declared. It’s interesting how through the centuries different groups have tried to find a way to approach God apart from the death of Christ. Ingenious theories have emerged to avoid the fact that God's forgiveness required the death of His own Son. Yet eternal justice stood in the balance at the cross. The public display of Jesus in His death as the divine satisfaction fulfilled God's justice so that He might justly forgive sinners. No kingdom citizenship exists apart from the cross. No sonship through God adopting us into His family can take place without the cross. To put it plain and simple: God could not forgive and save anyone apart from the satisfaction of His eternal justice; Christ felt the agony of God's eternal justice for us at the cross. He had to die; the eternally innocent on behalf of the eternally guilty, so that the guilty might be declared righteous — and now citizens of God's kingdom forever.

How do we know that God accepted the death of His Son on our behalf? Jesus explains, **“And He will be raised on the third day.”** The resurrection served as the divine exclamation point that God was fully satisfied in the death of His Son. Nothing more can be added; no more debt for our sins is owed. Christ has conquered every foe internally and externally, everything that stands between God and us, and with His conquering comes our kingdom citizenship. While citizenship in the United States was secured on the battlefields at Yorktown, Concord, and Bunker Hill, kingdom citizenship was secured on the Cross of Calvary. Jesus, our eternal champion went alone to the cross where He died, but three days later rose from the dead to ever lead His kingdom as Eternal King!

All of this is “Good News” which is the literal meaning of the word **“gospel.”** But the disciples just didn’t think this really was good news. We read, **“And they were greatly distressed.”** The word implies deep sorrow. They just couldn’t get over Jesus’ impending suffering and death. Evidently, Christ's promise of resurrection either didn’t make sense to them or they couldn’t hear it over the news of His impending death. So we find great irony. While Jesus declares the Good News, the disciples only plunge deeper into sorrow.

Now when Jesus again refers to His death, He says **“He will be raised on the third day,”** but you have to be raised from something, which means, once again, He’s referring to His death. Now Peter pushes back, but this time he has learned his lesson, so he’s a little cagier about it. He says, **“Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”** Elijah would return before the great day of the Lord. The great day of the Lord was the time in which God would appear and make everything right. What he’s saying is essentially, “Hey, we just saw Elijah up there. Elijah is here. The day of the Lord. So what’s up with all this suffering talk? You don’t need to suffer. Elijah is here; time to take over.”

Jesus just lays them out flat. He responds, “Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.” He’s letting them know, in no uncertain terms, “Hey, the new Elijah was John the Baptist, and he **has** come, and he suffered and died. I am the new Moses, and I’m not just going to lead the people out of political bondage like the old Moses; I’m going to deliver them from sin and death itself. But I have to suffer.”

What He’s saying to us ... when He says, “O slow of heart to believe, O foolish generation,” He’s talking to me. He’s talking to you. He’s talking to His disciples. He’s talking to all of us. And He’s saying, “Why isn’t suffering in your program? Anytime suffering comes

up, the idea that to follow Me means you're going to have to suffer, you just freak out. In this world you will have tribulations, and the only way I could come into this world of tribulations and save it is to go through **suffering to glory**. I'm here," says Jesus, "going through suffering to greatness, and if you follow Me, you'll have to go through **suffering to glory**.

But every time you hear there's suffering involved, every time I let suffering happen to you, every time it looks like following Me means suffering, you freak out. You go nuts. You say, 'No, no, no. You shouldn't be letting this happen. Why is God letting this happen? Why is God letting that happen?' In this world you will have tribulation, no matter who you are.

There's only one question still to be answered ...

CONCLUSION: *How Will You Respond?*

How will you respond? Will that tribulation, will that inevitable **suffering** you experience, make you **wiser, deeper, stronger, sweeter**, or will it make you bitter, hard, and joyless? Will it drive you **closer** to God or drive you **away** from God? Will it make you **more compassionate** about other people, or is it going to make you **more cynical** about human nature? In this world you will have tribulations. "You have to see that," says Jesus. "But there's a way of going through suffering to glory. I am, and if you follow me, you will too."

Well, then, what **IS** the key? What **WILL** keep the tribulations from turning you hard? What will make the tribulations be such that they turn you, like Jesus, into something glorious? The answer is worship. If you come off the mount remembering the reality, even though most of your time, most of your life, you don't see that ... Most of your life it's not all clear. Most of your life it's not all real. Most of your life it's not all that vivid. But it's worship.

Basically, it's the ability to know what the Father has done through the Son, the sense on your heart of that reality, even though you don't keep it all the time. If you have that sense of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and then you come off the mount and go on the journey to the cross, that will turn you into something glorious instead of something hard.

In some ways, this is way too easy a lesson. When I look at this ... I don't want to admit (and, therefore, I guess I'm assuming that you don't want to admit it either) that Jesus really says this, "***In this world you will have tribulation.***" We think if we're smart, or if we're good ... See, secular people of Northern Virginia think, "Well, if you have one problem after another problem, it's probably because you weren't **smart**." Christian people think, "Well, if you're just having one problem after another problem, you're just not **good**. These things wouldn't happen if you were confessing sin and living according to biblical principles."

Jesus says, "What greater biblical principle is there than ... I took up a cross; you have to take up a cross? The world hated Me; the world will hate you. I had to suffer in order to get to glory and resurrection; so will you. What greater principle could there be than that?" Therefore, Jesus is saying, "Through worship you have access to the very presence of God. You have to be clear in your mind about My Glory, My Person and Work, Who I Am, and about what God has done and is doing through Me.

You have to have a foretaste of the resurrection. You have to have a foretaste of the second coming. You have to have a foretaste of the new heavens and new earth, of that embrace God is going to give you because of Christ. You have to have a foretaste of that because this life, your life, is one long journey to the cross. If you have those foretastes and you're following that journey to the cross, it can make you into something glorious. Otherwise, you won't make it."

So how do you get that foretaste of Heaven? How do you get that sense of worship? How do you experience the presence of God. Well, look behind me. God says, I'll give you that foretaste, that sense, that experience ... in the sacraments of My Son, if you come in faith. This meal is a communal event. It is about eating together. It is about fostering true engagement with God, repenting of your sins, professing your faith, and experiencing the full grace of being a Christian. When you come to this table, you are declaring that suffering and death is the road to Christ and His glory. As we will read in **1 Corinthians 11:26**, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.***" Nothing so mitigates **against selfishness** as the Lord's Supper. Nothing calls us **away from the world** and back to Christ as the Lord's Supper.

This is a holy time when we hear, see, smell, touch, and taste that we are **in this together**. We are **with Christ together**. Heaven is a communal place, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb is a communal event, and the foretaste of Heaven, the sense of worship, and the experience of God's presence ... is a communal event ... **found** in the Lord's Supper. Think about that ... and then come to His table. You need to pray. Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have given us a King. In this passage, we see Your Son. Open our eyes that we might see our sin and then see our Savior. We see Him as You want us to see Him, as humble, as obedient, as glorious, as beloved by You. Help us to know and believe that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. Amen.

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John 16:33

"I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."