

Joy Comes in the Morning

As David stood among the smoldering ruins of what had been his home, he wept. As he faced the awful fact that the Amalekites had in one day reduced him to financial ruin, he wept. As he contemplated the terrifying reality that cruel and murderous bandits had kidnapped his family, he wept. All he could do was cry. Hot tears flowed down his face, and heavy sobs made his body convulse. The only outlet David could find for the fear and the anger and the pain that seized his soul was weeping.

David was not alone in his weeping. Six hundred men, all of them strong and valiant soldiers, men who had faced death many times without a hint of fear, now wept openly and uncontrollably. Many of these men were the champions whose heroic deeds would become legendary in Israel. These weren't weak men. These weren't men prone to emotional histrionics. But they couldn't hold back the hot, salty tears, nor did they want to. The biblical narration tells us they wept until they had no more power to weep. Powerful men wept until weeping had drained their power. They cried and cried until they were too tired to cry anymore.

What do you do when trouble hits you so hard that it knocks the wind out of you and makes you feel that it must be the worst day of your life? The first thing you do is to go ahead and weep. Stoicism has nothing to do with faith. Living by faith is not living without feelings. Being strong in faith does not make us immune to emotion. Those who live by faith experience emotion like everybody else—they just don't allow emotion to have the last word. God has created us as emotional beings; it is part of our human nature. Emotions are an essential part of experiencing pleasure and joy in life. Those who deny their emotional makeup become people with bland personalities incapable of really enjoying life. To deny true sorrow is also to deny true joy. Having a flat, prosaic personality is not what it means to be a person of faith.

You cannot even worship God without involving your emotions. David, who is depicted in Scripture as a great worshipper of God, was highly demonstrative in his worship. He would sing, shout and dance in his praise of God. We can involve the full range of our emotions when we worship God. The emotion that proceeds from a deep understanding of God's glory and goodness is filled with spiritual substance and is both vital and valid in worship. It should not be confused with empty emotionalism, which is emotion for emotion's sake.

If you can contemplate the rich salvation accomplished for you through the suffering of Jesus Christ upon the cross and be completely devoid of any emotional response, there is something wrong. God has made us to feel. We feel joy, we feel peace, we feel excitement, we feel anger and we feel sadness—this is how God created human beings. To deny these emotions is to deny your humanity. When the troubles of life strike us with particularly cruel blows, it's natural and perfectly acceptable—and perhaps even helpful—to respond with weeping. Weeping is not inconsistent with faith. Some of the greatest giants of faith in the Bible wept:

—Abraham, the father of faith, wept at the death of his wife Sarah.

—When Jacob met his future bride Rachel, he was so overwhelmed that he wept.

—When Joseph was reunited with his estranged brothers, he wept.

—Hezekiah wept when he received the bad report that he would die from his illness.

—Nehemiah wept over the sad state of Jerusalem.

—Job wept in the midst of his trial.

—The prophet Jeremiah wept over the sins of Israel.

–Peter wept over his failure and betrayal of Christ.

–Paul wept in the middle of his trials.

–John wept during his heavenly visions.

–Even Jesus wept!

The weeping of Jesus is a powerful testimony to the fullness of His humanity. There is much sorrow in this fallen world, and men and women have many reasons to weep.

One of our most beloved Christmas carols is “Away in a Manger.” Recently, while splitting wood on a subzero day during the Christmas season, I found myself humming the melody as the words circled through my mind:

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed/
The little Lord Jesus
laid down His sweet head.*

*The stars in the sky looked down where He lay/
The little Lord Jesus,
asleep on the hay.*

*The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes/
But little Lord Jesus,
no crying He makes ...*

I stopped right there. Baby Jesus doesn’t cry? Of course He does. Like every baby, Jesus cried at birth. Like every baby, Jesus cried when He was hungry. Like every child, Jesus cried when He was hurt or unhappy. The baby Jesus who doesn’t cry is the halo Jesus—the Jesus depicted so often in religious art. The problem with the halo Jesus is that He is not human. A baby who doesn’t cry is not human. A person who doesn’t cry is lacking in humanity. Jesus cried. He cried as a baby, as a child and as a man. He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Jesus cried. He shed the tears of God.

God in Christ shed tears? This is an astounding acknowledgment. But nothing that is common to man was kept

from God in Christ. Not birth, nor death; not trial, nor temptation; not sorrow, nor suffering. And not tears.

Some theologians have argued for the doctrine of divine impassibility. This doctrine, which states that God is without passion or emotion, was first developed by early theologians who were heavily influenced by Greek philosophers. It was later adopted by some of the Reformation theologians. Well, I have a bone to pick with these theologians. They have woefully underestimated the incarnation. Christ is not God masquerading as human. The incarnation is God made fully human—and tears are part of the human condition. Thus in Christ, we find not divine impassibility but divine suffering. We find the tears of God. These tears are integral to our salvation. For, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, “Only the suffering God can help.” It’s interesting to note that as a direct result of the Holocaust, most theologians now reject divine impassibility. Apparently, the notion that God adopts a passive attitude toward human suffering is no longer tenable in light of the horrendous suffering of the Holocaust.

It’s not the Stoic Greek philosophers who reflect the heart of God, but the weeping Hebrew prophets—not Zeno the Stoic philosopher, but Jeremiah the weeping prophet. The prophets wept because God weeps. Jesus wept because God weeps. The Word became flesh that God might join us in our tears.

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Yet the tears of God are not tears of mere commiseration. These are holy tears that lead to our liberation—liberation from the dominion of sorrow. God in Christ did not join us in sorrow merely as an experiment in empathy. He joined us in sorrow that He might lead us to the joy that comes in the morning. Jesus has entered fully into the new morning of Resurrection. The rest of creation groans, eagerly awaiting the promised liberation.

In the meantime, we who suffer are comforted with the knowledge that we are not alone in our suffering. Jesus joined us in our suffering and shed the tears of God. It is in those tears that we will ultimately find joy unspeakable and full of glory.

In the first Advent 2,000 years ago, God in Christ joined us in our tears. The Son of God was born in tears, like every baby who has ever been born. In His second Advent, or Second Coming, God in Christ will join us again, this time to wipe away all of our tears!

In the course of my life and ministry, I've had my own nights of weeping. When I was just a young 22-year old pastor, I wept as a disgruntled man in the church stood in a service and shouted, "Ichabod, Ichabod, the glory is departed," and then led half the congregation to leave the church. Later, there were times when the pressure and stress became so severe that I was reduced to tears during a very difficult multimillion-dollar building project. I wept when I stood in a hospital room with grieving parents as their teenage son was pronounced dead. There have been times of tears still too personal to talk about. I can say with the apostle Paul that I have served the Lord with many tears.

The Bible says there is a time to weep, and that cannot be denied. It would be an added cruelty to deny yourself or others tears in times of tragedy or deep personal pain.

But there is also a time to dry your tears and stop weeping. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

There is a night of weeping, but there is also a dawn of faith. When the morning comes, it is time to stop weeping and start rejoicing in God. If you continue to weep ... if you continue to hold on to your grief and sorrow, it will turn into self-pity, which can destroy your faith and prevent you

from coming out of your pain and into a place of victory.

It's important to realize there is a perverse weeping that is founded in self-pity and sinful unbelief. Such weeping arouses the anger of God. When the wilderness generation of Israelites was filled with cravings for the meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they used to eat as slaves in Egypt and complained and wept because all they had to eat in the wilderness was the manna God supernaturally supplied, "the anger of the Lord was greatly aroused" (Num. 11:10b, NKJV).

Sinful unbelief led the wilderness generation of Israelites to weep in fear and self-pity. This kind of weeping aroused the anger of God. You will never move out of a place of personal misery into a better and healthier place if you become locked into perpetual self-pity—it's one of the most destructive emotional states a human being can indulge in, and it must be resisted. Even when you have encountered the worst day of your life, there comes a time when you have cried enough. Eventually you must tell yourself, "Enough is enough," and make up your mind to cry no more. Never forget that self-pity is deadly. It has the capacity to destroy your faith and lock you in a self-imposed exile that is difficult to escape. The bottom line is you will never change your life by feeling sorry for yourself.

Listen for the Sound of Marching

There is an interesting story in 2 Samuel 5 about the time when David and his army were in the Valley of Rephaim (*rephaim* means "giants"). They were camped under a grove of mulberry trees. In the Hebrew language, the mulberry tree is called the *baka* tree or, literally, "the weeping tree." In other words, when the army of Israel was in the valley of giant trouble, they sat under the weeping trees. That is what we often do when we find ourselves in the valley of big-time trouble—we sit under the weeping tree. But God gave David a strategy to defeat the Philistines in the Valley of Giants. He told David,

“When you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall advance quickly” (v. 24b). If David would follow these instructions, the promise was, “the Lord will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines” (v. 24c).

I like that! God instructed David to listen for a sound that could be heard above the mulberry trees—a sound that could be heard above the weeping. It was the sound of marching. What was it? I think it must have been the sound of the angels, the armies of heaven, going forth into battle! When all you can hear is the sound of your own weeping, listen with your spiritual ears for the sound of the angels of God marching into your battle to defeat your adversaries. If you will dry your tears and rise up from under your weeping tree, you can march forward into the battle with the angels. There is a way to move from weeping into victory.

I have seen people who have allowed their grief to conquer them. It's sad and tragic. Their faith atrophies as they languish under the weeping trees. They become so absorbed in their own sorrow that they take it on as their new identity. Instead of passing through the valley of weeping, they make a decision to take up residence there. Natural sorrow, when indulged for too long, will cause you to develop a dark and morose personality that will attract demon spirits of depression. No matter what tragedy has visited your life, you still have a divine destiny and an eternal purpose in God that have the potential to bring you joy and satisfaction. Don't allow grief to conquer you! You don't have to stay in the sad place where you find yourself right now. It is possible to rise up and take the steps of faith that will carry you toward a better tomorrow.

The book of 2 Kings tells an amazing story of four lepers outside the gate of Samaria who had suffered more than their share of hard times. They all had an incurable disease. They were separated from their families and friends, and now they

were besieged by famine. They could have easily allowed themselves to be conquered by their grief, and few would have blamed them. But instead, they asked themselves one simple question: "Why sit we here until we die?"

These four men weren't just lepers; they were philosophers of a sort. In their miserable plight, they posed a philosophical question to themselves: Why should we just sit here until we're dead? People who have been overwhelmed with sorrow often ask all the wrong questions—questions like: "Why me?" "What did I do to deserve this?" "How much more will I have to endure?" But this was not the question the four lepers outside the gate of Samaria asked. They simply asked themselves, "Why sit we here until we die?" Of course, this is a rhetorical question designed to reveal the absurdity of inaction and thus spur them to some kind of positive action. They chose to shake off their depression and to rise up from the miserable place where they had been sitting. With hope renewed, they took faltering steps of faith and marched into a better tomorrow. By rising up and moving forward in faith, they not only found a better tomorrow for themselves, but they also brought salvation to a dying city. You can do the same thing. You can rise up out of your miserable situation and begin to move toward a better tomorrow.

On the worst day of your life, you will weep. This is inevitable and understandable. David did, and you will too. It's all right to release the poison of pent-up emotional pain through weeping. But remember, although weeping may last for a night, there will come a dawn of faith when you need to stop weeping and start believing. To turn your tragedy into triumph, you will have to go beyond weeping. {eoa}

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