

THE LAND OF TEARS

“We should be thankful for our tears; they prepare us for a clearer vision of God.” So wrote William A. Ward, one of the most quoted inspirational writers in America. I guess that’s another way of saying blessed are you who weep for you will be comforted. This quote reminds me of a passage from a book on grief written by a man who lost his 25-year-old son. He believed that after the loss of his son, he would for the rest of his life look at the world “through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.”

Feeling hopeful about viewing life through tears may sound ludicrous, but God has not left us mourning or weeping without purpose. To quote this author again, “Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s mourning, weep over humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, and be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.”¹

Crying and sorrow are characteristics of the places in the world where people die every 30 minutes from malaria, where children play in filthy, stagnant water and contract deadly diseases. Wherever people live with persecution, violence, war and division there are tears. Ecclesiastes notably reminds us there is a time to weep, but for some that time does not end.

We cry for a number of reasons. Some cry over economic woes, the lack of resources, rampant violent crime, bullying, fear, anxiety, mental illness, addiction, health concerns, loneliness or the state of the world. For me injustice is a common source of tears. When I read or watch the news I go back and forth from being enraged to being despondent, particularly if someone or some group is being treated unfairly.

I tend to lean towards melancholy and often it is difficult for me to understand how people can be unmoved by tragedy. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was at work before going to my seminary classes. I had wept while watching the planes hit and the buildings collapse, knowing the massive loss of human life and the collective sadness of our nation.

When my boss came in he gave his usual, “How you doing?” greeting and I told him I was deeply troubled by the situation. He simply uttered “uh huh” and went to look for the day’s sales figures.

How does God address our tears? The occurrence of crying is widespread throughout Scripture. Indeed, it is a volume filled with sorrow. We find Hagar, the mother of Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, crying in the desert not once but twice. The first time she was banished by Sarah out of jealousy. The second time Abraham sent both she and Ishmael away. Genesis 21 tells us that Hagar lifted her voice and wept, but that God heard the voice of the boy and called to Hagar from heaven. Surely God hears our silent tears as well as those we cannot stifle.

When Pharaoh ordered all male Hebrew infants to be thrown into the Nile there was much sorrow in Egypt, not unlike the grief of the mothers in Bethlehem when Herod ordered the death of all boys

¹ Howell, James C., *The Beatitudes for Today*, pg. 42-43

under age two in fear of the newborn king. There were mourners at the home of Jairus when Jesus went to heal his daughter. Jesus commented on the loud commotion, telling them the child was not dead but sleeping. Then He raised her to life again.

The death of a child to me would be unimaginable, as I only have one and would be devastated. We've heard from an author who lost a son. Listen to these exceptional words from one who lost a daughter. "One thing I have noticed about deep but good grief is that any little thing can trigger it. When I see a party hat my Christy gave me for my 60th birthday, I start crying. When I walk by her room and see the glitter stars on the ceiling glowing at night, I cry. When I see her picture, any picture, I cry. And it's okay. Men need to let themselves grieve just as much as women do.

Something is wrong, terribly and profoundly wrong, if you have no capacity to mourn the passing of someone you loved with all your heart. You need to let yourself grieve. So, if you see me and I am a bit teary, it's okay. God is helping me appreciate the intensities of what I miss — my Christy."²

There are causes of grief that are manageable but others take the legs out from under us. In my life I have grieved the deaths of family and friends, I have wept over the fear and frustration of living with domestic abuse, followed years later by frustration and fear when my daughter lived in the same undeserved situation in England.

Even that did not compare with the level of pain I felt the first time I walked away from the locked door of a psych ward separating my daughter and me. As I drove home from the hospital I cried and screamed in the car. To this day the date of that event still gives me pause, just like the anniversary of a death. It hurts but now it is a reminder of how much she has overcome.

Psalm 125 says those who sow in tears shall reap in shouts of joy. This same sentiment is expressed again and again. We find Jesus saying it in John 16:20, "*Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.*" We heard it in our psalm today, "*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.*"

This great reversal of fortune tells us there is more to life than what we experience at any given moment. It is a promise and with God a promise is a promise, even if there is a waiting period. We may not understand the timing, and yes, we may grow impatient and begin to doubt God and lose faith in what we once believed, but that is the time to remember to praise God despite our doubts.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful analogy about Heaven and Hell, presented in the form of one man's story of a bus ride. Beginning in the grey town of Hell and moving on to the bright country of Heaven, he experiences many kinds of departed people. Ultimately he learns this truth, "Not only this valley but all this earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved. That is what mortals misunderstand. They say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2012/01/27/good-grief-soundings-4/>

The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven. And that is why, at the end of all things, when the sun rises here and the twilight turns to blackness down there, the Blessed will say 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."³

Heaven works backwards – an amazing thought and if it proves to be true for us, then we shall sing Hallelujah! Perhaps Lewis took his inspiration from another source requiring explanation to its readers, the book of Revelation. However, by the end it is pretty plain for us to understand and so we often hear these words at funerals, *"and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more."*

One pastor sees three types of sorrow present in our world. There is natural sorrow, or that which comes to everyone as a natural part of life. Natural sorrow expressed in mourning releases a healing process that enables us to accept the pain, work our way through it, and adjust to life again.

Unnatural sorrow is so named because its effects in our lives are opposite to what God wants us to experience. Godly sorrow heals, but unnatural sorrow makes the wounds deeper and fills the heart with pain. Natural sorrow gradually helps us put life back together again, but unnatural sorrow tears things apart and keeps them that way.

The third sorrow is supernatural, or the pain we feel over sin, similar to the realization of the prodigal son where his choices had taken him. Not all our comforts will be given today. Psalm 58:6 teaches us that none of our tears will go unnoticed by God, *"You yourself have kept track of my misery. Put my tears into your bottle—aren't they on your scroll already?"*⁴ That's far preferable to catching teardrops in your hand.

What do you want when you are crying? To be left alone? A shoulder to cry on? Reassuring words? I guess that all depends on what you are crying about. "It is such a mysterious place, the land of tears." That quote is from *The Little Prince*. It says that no one can completely understand the pains of another or enter into their deepest emotions. One of the first things I was taught as a pastor was grief is different for everyone. It's very personal and affects each person uniquely.

To quote from C.S. Lewis again, "We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination."

We are meant to be there for each other in sorrow or joy. Romans 12:15 says to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Such a life is best envisioned by the little boy who whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman and who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the man's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there.

³Lewis, C.S., *The Great Divorce*, pg. 67-68

⁴ <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/cries-tears-and-weeping-seth-aryee-sermon-on-grace-85424.asp>

When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, “Nothing, I just helped him cry.”

What is the contemporary setting for this teaching of Jesus in His sermon? Parents whose children are killed, victims of crime, people who have disabling medical or emotional conditions, anyone who has ever loved and lost or simply loved so much it hurt. God still speaks to all those people and in all our circumstances. We may not feel blessed to be in tears but there is joy to be found, there is comfort to be sought, and there can be grief overcome, mourning turned to dancing.

But it takes courage and patience and faith, like those awaiting test results. Ask those who wait by a hospice bedside, find those who are fighting the temptation to drink or use drugs, waiting for the urge to pass. All forms of tears, whether fear or sorrow or grief or anxiety, or even the deep, deep sadness of depression, which believe me is not always the absence of feeling anything but the overwhelming feeling too much; all tears can be overcome.

I’ve never heard of anyone crying themselves to death, although certainly our sadness or fear may lead to an all-too-final decision. In the moment it may seem God’s promise is empty but it does come. Pain, grief, frustration, anger; some of these things are temporary, others can recur and be prolonged, and yet God promises that we will be comforted. Does it always have to be God who comforts? Certainly we should comfort each other, but our truest comfort comes from God’s Spirit.

The Spirit’s comfort is like no other. A spouse may listen, care deeply, and embrace you. Your friend may stay the night. Your pastor may read a Psalm or say a prayer. Church folks may name you in a prayer chain or deliver a casserole. But the Spirit, who rests mightily upon your spouse, friend, and pastor, can go where no one else, not even the surest, most tender spouse or friend, can go.

The Spirit delves into unseen depths of your soul and knows you better than you know yourself, feeling your suffering before you are even aware of it. And the Spirit brings a comfort more powerful, more gentle, than any combination of hugs, words, or casseroles.⁵ So dry your eyes, sleep well and awaken to the joy of God’s presence.

⁵ Howell, James C., *The Beatitudes for Today*, paraphrased, pg. 45