

Truth for Today

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Imitating a Personal God: Imitating a God who mourns

What is the shortest verse in the Bible? Perhaps, like me, you had been taught from Sunday School days that it is "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). It was only a few years ago I discovered that, while that may be so for our English Bible, in the original Greek in which the Bible was written, the shortest verse is, in fact, "Rejoice always" (1 Thessalonians 5:16). I find it interesting that these two verses, which between them span this vast range of human emotion, from weeping to rejoicing, are linked in this way.

Today's talk, 'Imitating the God who mourns', is the third in a series entitled, 'Imitating a personal God'. So far, we have looked at 'Imitating the God who loves' and 'Imitating the God who hates'. Next week, God willing, we will look at 'Imitating the God who rejoices'. Loving, hating, mourning, rejoicing – these are all intensely personal human emotions. Why are we humans such emotional beings? I believe it is because, as the Bible tells us, in the beginning, when God made man, "God said, 'Let Us make man in our image, according to Our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). It is because we have been made in the likeness of God, that we experience the same emotions as God. Our human emotions have, of course, been corrupted by sin. Nevertheless, they are still there, reflecting the God who created us. It is not surprising, then, that wise King Solomon, in that celebrated passage in Ecclesiastes, could write, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...a time to love, and a time to hate" (3:1-8).

So what can we learn from the Bible about the God who mourns? We do not have to read very far in our Bibles before we find, in the days of Noah, "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry (or, repented, as the Authorised Version has it) that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:5-6).

When we are sorry, or repent, it is usually because of something wrong that we have done and usually it is followed by a change of mind or purpose. It is important to stress that our omniscient, omnipotent God does not change His mind. He never makes mistakes! Rather, God's being sorry, or repenting, indicates a change in His attitude brought about by a change in man's behaviour. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, it would seem that it was His custom to come down and walk in the Garden with them "in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8). What delightful times of fellowship those must have been, both for God and for Adam and Eve! But Adam and Eve had to be put out of that Garden because of their disobedience. Though Scripture does not record the fact, I do not doubt that there was deep sorrow in the heart of God then.

But now, in Noah's day, the sin and disobedience of man was such and the sorrow in the heart of God was so great, that God must send a flood to destroy man. Only righteous Noah and his family would be saved, though opportunity was given to all to find shelter in the ark.

But perhaps the most vivid picture we have in the Old Testament of the God who mourns is seen in the book of the prophet, Hosea. It is worth spending some time this morning considering this though we shall only be able to touch on its main features. If you are not familiar with this book, please take time at the end of this broadcast, or at some suitable time, to read it through in one sitting. You will find yourself deeply moved by it.

Hosea, as Hosea 1:1 tells us, lived during the time of the later kings of the northern kingdom, Israel, and of the southern kingdom, Judah. He was probably an inhabitant of the northern kingdom at the time when God allowed it to be defeated by the Assyrians and carried away captive. That judgment of God fell upon the northern kingdom because of their disobedience and idolatry. Some 100 or so years later, the southern kingdom, Judah, suffered the same fate, carried away captive to Babylon, for the same reasons.

It was no light matter for God to judge His people in this way. In fact, Isaiah writing about the judgment of God describes it as "His awesome work, and ...His alien act" (28:21). How much rather would God have had His people in their land, walking in obedience to Him. But now the disobedience of His people was such that God must allow them to be carried away captive so that they might turn to Him in repentance and once more enjoy His blessing.

God wanted Hosea to understand something of the pain that was in His heart at having to execute this judgment upon His people. So in chapter 1, we find God instructing Hosea to marry a wife who would subsequently prove to be unfaithful. We can hardly imagine the pain that such a command would spell for this godly man. But Hosea obediently marries Gomer. Subsequently a son is born and they call him Jezreel (meaning 'God will sow'). Later, a daughter, Lo-Ruhamah (meaning 'no mercy') is born followed by another son, Lo-Ammi (meaning 'not my people'). These latter names are meant to indicate something of God's attitude to His people as a result of their disobedience. They may also suggest that these children might be the result of Gomer's unfaithfulness. (It is interesting that while it is said of the first child that Gomer "conceived and bore him a son", the 'him' is omitted in the births of the other two children.) The agony of heart and mind that Hosea would be suffering is almost unimaginable!

But worse was to come! In chapter 3, we find that Gomer had run off and sold herself into prostitution. God tells Hosea to go and buy her back from the slave market. We read, "So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver, and one and one-half omers of barley. And I said to her, 'You shall stay with me many days; you shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; thus I will be toward you'" (3:2-3). She was still legally Hosea's wife, but he must go and buy her back to himself! Could the poor man suffer any more?

Yet, as I said earlier, God takes Hosea through these horrendously distressing circumstances so that Hosea might begin to understand something of the pain that was in God's heart for the unfaithfulness and disobedience of His people. God's heart is laid bare in chapter 11: "When Israel was a child, I loved him. As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed to the Baals, and burned incense to carved images. I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love...How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? (Note: Admah and Zeboiim were cities that suffered alongside with Sodom and Gomorrah in their destruction in the time of Lot, Abraham's nephew.) My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come with terror" (verses 1-9).

It is surely impossible to read these words without a deep sense that here, indeed, is the God who mourns!

When we come to the New Testament, it is not difficult to see in the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, that same sorrow over the disobedience of His people and that same concern that yearns for their blessing. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah had foretold that the coming Messiah would be "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (53:3). We shall look at two such occasions.

In John 11, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, had died. All three had been dear friends of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, verse 5 specifically notes His love for them. Jesus had not gone to Bethany as soon as he heard of Lazarus' illness for very good reasons: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (verse 4). When Jesus came to Bethany, Lazarus had already been buried. We read, 'Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to Him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, 'See how He loved Him!'...Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it" (verses 32-38).

The stone is rolled away and, in a great demonstration of His resurrection power, the Lord Jesus summons Lazarus back to life. At the heart of this story, however, are the memorable words with which we began our talk this morning, "Jesus wept". The Greek word translated 'wept' literally means 'shed tears'. It is only used here in the New Testament; a different word is translated 'weep' in other parts of the New Testament. If you like, in the wisdom of His inspiration of Scripture, God saves up this special word for this very special occasion. Here indeed is a moving demonstration of the God who mourns!

No doubt, the Lord Jesus wept in perfect sympathy with the sorrow that was in the hearts of Mary and Martha. But I believe He wept, too, as He saw the terrible effects of sin that had come into the world that, when He created it, was "very good" (Genesis 1:31) – a world in which death would have had no part but for man's sin and disobedience (Romans 5:12).

The prophet, Isaiah, had written of the coming Messiah, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (61:1). How wonderfully those words were fulfilled in Bethany that day!

But that display of true grief was not an isolated occasion. Following on the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, Luke tells us, "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If

you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:41-44).

Here, the Lord Jesus mourns over Jerusalem as He foresees the judgment that would inevitably come upon them for their crucifixion of Him. That destruction, as we know, was carried out by the Romans some 40 years later.

Matthew also tells us something of those feelings of the Lord Jesus at that time: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37-38).

The sorrow of the Lord Jesus was not for the sufferings that He would shortly undergo at Calvary, but for those in Jerusalem upon whom He saw that the judgment of God would fall in a coming day.

But the title of our talk today is ‘Imitating the God who mourns’. We have clearly seen instances throughout Scripture that leave us in no doubt about the fact that we have a God who mourns, and mourns deeply. Why should we imitate a God who mourns?

Paul urges the Ephesian Christians, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1). It is interesting that the Greek word translated ‘imitators’ is closely related to our word ‘mimic’. Just think of that – mimicking God! That word is both an encouragement and a challenge. How often in human families we see even little children imitating their parents – little girls putting on their mother’s high heeled shoes and struggling to walk in them! We see little boys pretending to drive the car, just like their fathers. It is all part of our human make-up. But it must be part, too, of our spiritual make-up.

When we trusted Christ as Saviour, as the One who died for our sins at Calvary, we received as God’s free gift eternal life, the very life of God within us (Romans 6:23). That is why Jesus had to say to Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (or ‘born anew’, or ‘born from above’) (see John 3). Never let us lose sight of the wonder of this! As Christians, we have the very life of Christ within us! But that life needs to be seen in a practical way. Using a slightly different picture, Paul writes to the Corinthians, “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). We are to be imitators of God, not because of some enforced commandment, but “as beloved children”, that is, as those who know that they are deeply loved by their heavenly Father, whose love leads them to love Him in return and to want to please Him.

So we are to imitate the God who mourns. We can do this in at least two ways. First of all, on a personal level. We have seen the deep concern of the Lord Jesus for individuals like Mary, Martha and Lazarus. So we are exhorted, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). It will not do blindly to go through life saying, “I’m all right, Jack”. We need to make time to share with those who are in trouble and distressed. Even the world acknowledges, “A trouble shared is a trouble halved”. Perhaps that is why Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

But as well as a concern for individuals, we need to have a concern for our nation, to mourn for it in its departure from God. We have seen something of Jesus’ concern for Jerusalem, the embodiment of the Jewish nation. We have also seen something of the deep sorrow of God in Hosea’s day for the nation that had gone so far from Him. That is an area where, sadly, I have to confess that I have not been as concerned as I might. My boyhood was spent in the years immediately prior to and during World War II. Since then, there has been a steady falling away from Christian standards, so much so that today Christianity is becoming increasingly marginalized. And I have not mourned over that as I might. I need to learn from Daniel, who not only mourned over the sin of His people but confessed it as his own (see Daniel 9).

May each Christian listener this morning take to heart the departure of our nation from God, mourn over it before Him, asking Him to turn our hearts back to Himself so that we might once more enjoy His blessing!

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