

Three Groups of Women and Their Tears

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I have three passages to read from the word of God this evening.

Then he said to me, 'Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, "The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land".' He said also to me, 'You will see still greater abominations that they commit.' Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. (Ezek 8:12-14)

And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!" Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us", and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Luke 23:26-31)

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' Having said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned and said to him in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'—and that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)

God give us good understanding of his word.

My topic tonight is tears: good tears and bad tears, true tears and false tears. What wonderful things tears are, aren't they? Some people cry very naturally, and most people cry when they are in deep trouble, pain or distress. Tears are a merciful mechanism put into our bodies by the loving Creator himself. By our tears our feelings gain expression and sometimes wash away harmful chemicals that are produced in our system by too much grief. Tears, then, are relief for sorrow and pain.

And yet, what comical creatures we are. Tears can sometimes be tears of joy, can they not? Under intense joy, athletes, winning the marathon or something, can collapse in tears at the end of the race, even while they are holding the great, triumphant cup that they have won. And, without telling tales out of school, some dear ladies love a good cry, don't they? If you're friends enough with them they will confide in you that they really enjoy having a good cry.

And so tonight I'm going to talk about three groups of women and their tears:

- (1) The women weeping for Tammuz in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem;
- (2) The women of Jerusalem who wept for our Lord as he was being led out to be crucified;
- (3) Mary Magdalene in the garden, weeping for her sorrow, when the Lord appeared to her and dried her tears forever.

And you say, 'But my good preacher, what on earth has that got to do with a pre-Easter celebration?'

Well, strange as it will seem, all these tears are concerned with death and burial and then resurrection. Though the theme is common—death, burial and resurrection—I'm afraid two lots of the tears are bad beyond description, and only one lot of tears is good.

Tears are an expression of our emotions, and, of course, when it comes to our dealing with God, how could it be otherwise that, from time to time, we shall feel the strongest and the deepest of emotions? How could you possibly face your Creator, in all his holiness and in all his abundant love, and know his forgiveness as well as his justice, and not be deeply moved, whether it means to tears or not? Therein is a danger lurking for us all, for in religion there can, of course, be true and good tears, and there can be utterly bogus and useless tears.

1. The women weeping for Tammuz

And so to our first story. In Ezekiel's day, if you had gone into the temple, which is the house of the Lord, you might have seen women crying their eyes out in the temple courts. Had you known no better, you would have said to your friend walking with you, 'Look at those dear women over there. I wonder what their grief and sorrow is. Where is there anybody I can find to comfort them in their sorrow? They are obviously deeply distressed.'

Or you might have said to yourself, 'Look at those dear women and their tears. I suspect they have been listening to a sermon from the word of God that has exposed their sin and made them conscious of the judgment and justice of a thrice holy God, and they have come under conviction of sin. Where can we find an evangelist to come and show them the way of forgiveness, that they might be reconciled to God and their tears be turned to joy?'

But if you thought like that, you would have been thinking far from the truth. They were, in fact, enjoying their crying and it was nothing to do with God or his temple or his word. They were having a good cry; they were having tremendous emotions. It was nothing whatsoever to do with salvation, and I can tell you what it was all about.

Who was Tammuz?

They were in the temple of the Lord, but they weren't concerned with his word. They were concerned with an old, old, silly legend. They were weeping for Tammuz. As briefly as I can put the story, Tammuz was a Sumerian shepherd. He belonged to the Sumerian civilization that was thousands of years old. He was an ordinary shepherd, except for this—and here the story begins to get dark and full of sentimental nonsense.

He fell in love with the goddess of love, and the goddess of love fell in love with him. You can see this as the beginning of a kind of a Barbara Cartland novel, can't you? But you shouldn't be able to see it, because I doubt whether you have read her books—not if you're a Christian and have got something worthier to read than that old sentimental stuff. But never mind!

I'll tell you about the goddess of love in the ancient world. You see, once upon a time original mankind knew the true and the living God, but the Bible tells us they didn't like to retain the knowledge of him in their minds. They found it inconvenient; they wanted to strike a blow for freedom and be free of his constraints and his solemn laws and the promise of his judgment. And so, of course, they got rid of the idea and banished him to the fringe of their thinking.

But they still found that they had to have some things to go for in life, and so what they did was to begin to deify the world around them. They made a god out of the sun and a goddess out of the moon, a god of the storm and of the process of fertility. And when they felt the sexual urge inside them, they deified that as well. In their ancient town they called her Ishtar. Many other nations did the same thing. In Greece, they would have called her Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

She never did exist, of course. She was but the people's imaginative deification of the sexual urge that they found inside them. It had a terrible effect upon many of them because, when you elevate the sexual urge to a goddess, then anything that the goddess commands goes, doesn't it? People who were getting into all kinds of immorality and unfaithfulness in their marriages thought they had explained it all when they said, 'Well, Ishtar made me do it. The goddess of love made me do it.'

Like the secretary, who has just corrupted her boss and broken his marriage and ruined his family, when you ask her what on earth she was thinking about, she will say, 'Love made me do it', as though love was some goddess. When she begins to lose all moral consideration, all considerations of God and his law, other people's happiness and home go out of the window. It's enough to say that you were moved by Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and that explains all the multi-million divorces that are going on everywhere around us in society.

Well anyway, Ishtar was the goddess of love. When their marriages hadn't gone too well, the women very often sought relief in contemplating what was simply a projection of their own wishes and fantasies of the ideal love situation.

They heard a silly old story about Tammuz, which was a bit of religious idolatry. As I said, this humble shepherd fell in love with the goddess of love and the goddess of love fell in love with him. Sounds like the mix for a really good old sentimental novel! But he died, poor chap, and went down to the underworld. But, how marvellous love is, the goddess of love descended into the underworld to seek her shepherd.

Well, when the women heard that story they thought it was marvellous, and it sent forth gushing tears out of their eyes for the sheer sentimentality of it. And the old story spread throughout all the nations, of course. You wouldn't think people could be so silly, would you?

In Egypt they had their version. In Greece they had their story too. When the goddess of love went down to see her lover, whose name by this time was Adonis, she managed to get him resurrected again. Hence the connection, God forbid, with this Easter celebration.

And here they were in God's temple, supposedly worshipping the Lord. And what was moving them was not God or his word, but sheer idolatry. The sheer enjoyment of sensuous emotion provoked by idolatrous ideas. God called it an abomination.

We need to watch our emotions

What has that got to do with us, as we now celebrate and remember the death of the Lord Jesus and his rising again? Well, the first thing it does is to ask us to watch our emotions. You see, it is easy in religious circles to work on people's emotions, isn't it? I've known preachers who were past masters at it by telling all the sob stories they could tell, and getting people coming out in droves to the front to get converted, that had very little to do with true repentance for sin and faith in the Lord Jesus. And of course, the conversions didn't last; they were only a form of religious sensationalism.

Our good friends who have played for us tonight will know the vast dangers that attach to music when music is misused. In the early days of The Beatles you could see what their music was geared to. A lot of it was deliberately directed towards provoking sensuous emotions.

And it has become a sad thing, as I travel round this world, to see Christian music groups in some countries adopting the same style of music. Watch any film star, if you must, singing or crooning, or whatever you call it, with all the bodily swaying and the ecstatic look in the eyes, and you recognise at once that it has an appeal to the sensuous. But you can find some Christian groups nowadays where they croon in the same fashion and they sway with the same bodily motion.

How much it has to do with the gospel of Christ and God's salvation, it would be difficult to guess, wouldn't it? It seems to be directed towards provoking sensuous emotions that God calls an abomination. God save us all from that type of thing.

2. The women of Jerusalem

Let's come to the second group of women. They were far more healthily-minded; they weren't provoked to their tears by some idolatrous ditty. What provoked them to tears? Well, it was the sight of our blessed Lord Jesus being led out to be crucified. They knew what kind of an agonising death crucifixion would be and they knew in their hearts that our Lord Jesus was innocent.

As he was being led by the soldiers to his place of crucifixion they came round him, wringing their hands and weeping profusely for this poor young man who was going to be so cruelly put to death.

At first sight it seems strange that the Lord Jesus should have answered them so severely. 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children'

(Luke 23:28). And the very severity of it startles us, doesn't it? Was he not grateful for their compassion?

But you see, we must be aware of what was really going on at Calvary, and our Lord began to explain to them.

'It's not I,' said he, 'who's got the wrong end of the stick, you know. It's you and your fellow citizens. For if they permit this extreme perversion of justice in a nation that is what you might call 'a green tree'—still moderately civilised—what will they do when sin of this kind eventually brings forth its inevitable harvest? God is not mocked, you know. What you sow, you reap. And, if you sow this injustice and this sinfulness, one day you will reap it with a vengeance. The time is coming when men shall call on the rocks to hide them from the face of God, for his judgments are coming upon them. Don't weep for me; weep for yourselves.'

It is not that our Lord was ungrateful for their womanly sympathy for him in his suffering.

But you see, if there was a terrible motor car accident outside and you went out and saw mutilated bodies of young men and women on the street, some amongst us would be moved to tears at the shock of it all. 'Poor young people, poor young people,' we should say. The psychological reaction of seeing suffering moves people to burst into tears, but ten weeks down the line they will have forgotten all about it.

For the women of Jerusalem, it was a psychological reaction of seeing a poor young man going to his *execution*, as they would have described it. And that's all. Ten weeks after that they would have forgotten about it completely. Nice as it was of them to be compassionate, it didn't add up to conviction of sin or to repentance. It didn't add up to even a faint idea of what mankind's situation is: that this is a wicked world, and very soon the heavens will part and men shall cry for the very rocks to hide them from the face of him that sits on the throne, as the book of the Revelation has it (6:15–17).

Let us tear all fantasy from our eyes. Men and women cannot go on sinning without reaping the harvest.

'That is the thing to get hold of,' says Christ. 'There's coming a great, great harvest.'

What emotions does Calvary stir in us?

From his way towards Calvary, that we shall be thinking about in these coming days, the blessed Lord Jesus speaks to you and he speaks to me.

'Have you got the right end of the stick? How are your emotions tonight?'

Being realistic in face of the world and what the world really is, and human sin and the coming judgment of God, doesn't call for a psychological reaction. It calls for genuine repentance and faith and reconciliation with God.

The dying thief

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying,

'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' (Luke 23:32-43)

How different was the dying thief, as we call him, to these women of Jerusalem? There he writhed in his agony, nailed by hands and feet to the cross. At first he joined his companion, the other thief, in blaspheming Christ and saying, 'Look here, you say you're the Christ, don't you? You're supposed to be the Messiah. If you're the Messiah, get us out of this or we shall not believe you.'

There are lots of people like that, aren't there? They go on merrily singing, but when they get themselves into trouble, they say, 'If you're Jesus Christ, my God, why don't you get me out of my trouble?'

The Lord made no attempt to get either of the thieves out of their trouble. They had sinned against the laws of the state; they were suffering their due reward. Salvation isn't an easy way to get out of your trouble.

Presently, the other thief began to think, as best he could, as the pain seared his very brain and drained his life blood away. He was leaving it rather late to start thinking, but presently, as best he could, he turned to the other thief with his rigorous rebuke: 'Don't you even fear God?' said he.

And why should the man fear God?

'Seeing you are under the same sentence of condemnation,' (v. 40).

Same as who? He didn't mean the same as the other thief, did he? It's no consolation, if you're dying with another sinner, and both of you are going to hell—that won't comfort either of you.

What the thief was saying was this. 'Don't you fear God, seeing that you—crazy sinner that you are, like I am—are in the same condemnation as Jesus Christ? We are being justly rewarded for our evil lives, but this man has done nothing wrong.'

What does that show? It shows that this world is a desperately unjust place, where the innocent and the guilty very often suffer alike.

And what does it mean? At least it told the dying thief that this world is not the end, and there must come a day of judgment. This feeling of right and wrong that we have, we didn't originate it ourselves, it comes from God. And if it comes from God, life can't end like this, where the just and the unjust suffer equally. If God gave us this feeling of right and wrong in our hearts, we know that there will come a day of judgment.

'Don't you even fear God?' says he to the other fellow. 'We're on the very eve of eternity, going out to face God's judgment, and you and I are not fit to meet it.'

How shall we meet God?

There's going to be a judgment, and there's a God. The very cross of Christ tells us that. There is a God who cares for justice. How shall we meet him?

Now the thief had forgotten about his companion. He had very few minutes left to get right to meet God: tonight he would be in a grave. And then he began to think about this Jesus. He'd never met anybody like him. When the soldiers pierced his hands and feet and nailed him to Calvary, instead of turning round and cursing them he prayed for them: 'Father, forgive them.' And as he thought about the coming judgment and meeting God, led by God's Holy Spirit himself, he turned to the Saviour: 'Lord,' he said, 'I've been an outlaw all my life but would you allow me into your kingdom? Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

The Lord said, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (v. 43).

We have no great description of what the thief suffered. Luke was a doctor and he could have painted the most harrowing scene of the groans and the sobs and the sweat and the gore, and all the rest of it. Luke wasn't interested in it. He did not describe the Saviour's physical sufferings either.

Why not? Because Calvary is not there to evoke our psychological emotions at physical suffering. You can gaze on a crucifix and see its gore and terror and work yourself up into a psychological state and never be born again, you know. That's false emotion. Calvary is there to talk to our consciences, not our emotions, to bring home us to the fact we're sinners. There is going to be a judgment and we need to repent and get right with God.

If we take those steps we shall find forgiveness and assurance of Paradise, as the dying thief found it. For many of us that will result in copious tears of gratitude to God, but it's not the tears that are important, it is the repentance and the faith.

3. Mary Magdalene in the garden

One lot of tears was very good tears; they were Mary's tears. Mary Magdalene, dear woman, came to the sepulchre weeping. As she wept and looked in, suddenly she turned and saw behind her someone she thought to be the gardener, and she said, 'I'm looking for Jesus Christ, my Lord. I can't find his body. Somebody's taken him away. Can you tell me where they've put him so I may get him and take him away?' (John 20:15).

When he said, 'Mary', she realised it was the risen Lord. She had found the living Saviour. He dried her tears, and she didn't need to weep any more.

What a blessed gospel message. Christ not only died for our sins and was buried, but he rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures, and there will be an end of crying. He has overcome death and risen the other side of the grave.

I do literally believe that story about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Yes, I do, and John gives us a number of reasons why he did too.

The evidence which John and Peter saw

There were the great apostles, John and Peter, and they came to the grave. They saw the evidence of the grave clothes and how they were lying. They did a little bit of thinking about it and came to the conclusion that the body must have come right out of the grave clothes without touching them. And thus, in the early hours, as they surveyed the objective evidence in the tomb, they came to believe that Jesus had bodily risen from the dead.

The evidence which Mary Magdalene saw

I have not time to discuss with you this evening the significance of that objective evidence for the resurrection of the Lord. I must concentrate on the other bit of evidence that John supplies us: the evidence that Mary gave.

Now, ladies, you'll forgive me in what I'm going to say, won't you? Sometimes we men are pretty hard-hearted, as you see I am, but women have a loving nature, don't they? They naturally cling to loved ones that are gone.

I remember, when I was about four, a good lady showing me an envelope in which was a curl of very lovely light fair hair. It was a curl from her little boy's hair. She still had it in the envelope, although he was then fifty, I should think, and as bald as he could be. But there you are! Her mother's love couldn't let it go. It was the *clinging syndrome*; clinging to the past, not wanting to let it go. Thank God for dear women whose love is so steadfast.

Mary was like that, wasn't she? Having seen the evidence, the learned apostles went home for breakfast. And I don't know whether they said to Mary, 'Come home with us. You've been here a long time and this is distressing for you. There's nothing more to be seen, the tomb is quite empty.'

But not Mary. She stayed put, for without Christ life was empty and desolate. Even when she thought he was dead, she and the other women had brought spices and they were going to do their best to embalm the body finally, and then make a tomb for it where they might come. It's natural, isn't it? People recently bereaved coming to the tomb of their relative, so that they might weep there and express their grief? They wanted to hold on, if they could, to the very dead body of the Lord Jesus, and make a shrine of his grave, where forever after they may honour his memory.

And then something happened, and the disciples, Mary Magdalene included, abandoned the tomb completely—so completely that in a few decades nobody knew where the original tomb was. They had to go looking for the tomb, searching old records and legends galore, because the Christians had abandoned it completely. They didn't care where the tomb was.

Why didn't the early Christians care where the tomb was? Well, you care nothing about the tomb of somebody who is risen!

When you get home to heaven with your grandmother, you'll not ask for permission to come and visit her and put a few flowers on her grave, will you? Of course not. Who will worry about graves when the Lord comes and raises the dead?

Why did the Christian women leave the grave and dry up their tears? Because, like Mary, they had found the risen Lord. They had heard him speak and his words dried up their tears. They were calm; there was no fuss, no furore.

'Mary,' he said, 'go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' The marvel is that he was standing already on the other side of death, already risen, out in the eternal world, and he announced a relationship that bound Mary to his Father, and to his God, and to himself. And how was the reality conveyed? By the calm word of the Lord on the resurrection morning.

Mary went to grasp him. Feminine-like, still—wanting to cling to him.

He said, 'No, Mary.'

It is not a matter of a sensual feeling. Nothing like that. This is a spiritual thing. A spiritual relationship.

'Don't try to grasp me. I have to ascend to my Father.'

The spiritual reality of our union with the living Lord

And so it remains. It is not, of course, to despise emotion, but we have to be on our guard lest we evoke false emotion, sensuousness. It's not that we despise tender emotion, but conversion is a deeper thing than emotion. It is a moral thing, and requires us to use our moral judgment. Let's love the Lord with all our hearts, but the source and peace and the spring of it all is a spiritual relationship with a living Lord.

As he speaks to all his people this very night from the other side of the grave—'I have ascended to my Father, and your Father, to my God and your God'—we should grasp the wonderful spiritual reality of this union with God and his Son. It will dry our tears and send us on our pilgrim way home to heaven, rejoicing.

And even when our pains draw out our tears, as they naturally and rightly do, through life's hard knocks, troubles, bereavements and distresses, we shall smile through them. They shall not have the victory; joy shall be ours in the morning. We're on our way home to God's eternal heaven.

Thus may God bless his word to all our hearts, for his name's sake.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.