

Who Will Give My Head Waters, Seven Reasons to Pray for Holy Tears

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the significance of tears, drawing from experiences in Abraham Lincoln's time to address the current political and social climate. It emphasizes the need for a balanced emotional response, genuine tears over performance, discerning spiritual tears, and finding strength in God's sovereignty amidst sorrow. The message encourages perseverance in work despite tears, seeking God for holy tears, and ultimately finding hope in the promise of a tearless eternity.

Scripture: Luke 19:41, Hebrews 12:17, Psalms 126:5, Jeremiah 9:1, Revelation 21:4

Topics: "Emotional Resilience", "Hope in Sorrow"

Description

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Transcript

Well, Charlie and Kenny, not Brett, came to tears. And I'm going to talk about tears. And let me tell you why.

The rivers that came together to incline me to say what I'm going to say for these next 20 minutes or so. Noel and I and David and Karen Livingston were immersing ourselves for two days last week in Abraham Lincoln lore in Springfield, Illinois and New Salem. And there's a new Abraham Lincoln museum, which I recommend highly.

It's the most remarkable museum I've ever visited because of the two theaters that are in it. And there's a wall, not very large, 20 feet across maybe, covered with, I took a picture of one of them, with vile opprobrium dumped on Abraham Lincoln in the press. For example, Lincoln's speeches consist of condensed lumps of imbecility, buffoonery, and vulgar malignity.

Richmond Examiner, March 4, 1861. Dozens of them, all over the wall, from all the papers across the country. Not all the papers, but lots of papers.

Which was very good for me to see because we do not live in a unique time. If you're young and you're not aware of Abraham Lincoln and lots of controversies along the way, you would think the hostilities and the polarization of our political environment right now is just as bad in my lifetime as it has ever been. That's true.

That's 73 years. But it's been worse in times past. The question for all the TCT churches and pastors and lay people is, how do we orient ourselves? How do we talk? How do we think? How do we feel in that milieu? What effect does it have? I heard Tim Keller say last week down at TCT, the polarization of our culture makes its way into every single institution in the West.

That means your church feels more tense over disagreements probably than it used to. Like, disagreements have always been there. But today, people feel more vulnerable, more easily angered.

And so the question is, OK, what do we do? That's one river flowing into this little talk. Another is watching the social media sphere and how people are doing it and not liking a lot of what I see. Reading blogs that are written in a way, I think that's not the way I want to do it.

I don't want Bethlehem to be that way. I don't want Bethlehem College and Seminary to sound like that. I don't want Design God to sound like that.

I don't want the TC churches to sound like that. I don't want to sound like that. So that's the second river that's flowing into this.

We all can do blogs if we want to. How should they sound? What should they taste like? The third is I do this little thing called Look at the Book, which is an online teaching ministry where I put a text on the screen and draw on it and try to get meaning out of it. And I'm working my way through Philippians.

And I just arrived at verse 18. And that's what I want to linger on. So Paul has begun chapter 3. Watch out for the dogs.

Watch out for those who mutilate the flesh. Watch out for the evildoers. We are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God in glory in Christ Jesus.

Put zero confidence in the flesh. And then he gives his pedigree of the flesh and all his incredible, boastworthy achievements as a Pharisee. And then he says, it's all garbage.

And then he said, I just want to know Him. I want to share His sufferings. I want to know the power of His resurrection.

I want to make it to the end and be resurrected with Him. I forget everything that lies behind. I'm just screaming forward for the prize of the upper call of God in Jesus.

And let all of us who are mature think this way. And if anything, you think otherwise. God will show you that.

Come on, brothers, join in imitating me. And keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example that you have in me. Now, that's the end of verse 17.

And here comes verse 18. In verse 18, he says, brothers, join in imitating me. Keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example that you have in us.

For many, here's verse 18, for many of whom I have told you before and now tell you with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things. And I just stopped.

I said, okay, I want to do a lesson on this verse or this paragraph. And I just could not get away from I tell you now with tears. I tell you now with tears.

And so I want to give you seven exhortations about holy tears. The first thing that struck me is that he's writing and he says, as I'm writing, or either he's dictating, I don't know which he's doing, he's crying. So he says, for many of whom I have often told you and now I tell you even with tears.

So as he's writing, he's crying. What is he writing? Here's what he's writing. They're enemies of the cross.

They're going to hell. They make appetite their God. They boast in what they should be ashamed of and they're ashamed of what they should be proud of.

And their minds gravitate toward worldliness like a magnet. Now those are hard, negative, offensive things to say to people. Your end is destruction.

Your God is your belly. You glory in your shame. You hate the cross.

You love the world. And he's crying. John Piper can say those things relatively easily and seldom cry as I do.

So that's what struck me. Here's a man, I love the Apostle Paul. I wrote a book about why I love the Apostle Paul.

This is one of the reasons, because he's saying the things that have to be said. We've got to say things like that. If you're not willing to say things like that because you're a teary-eyed person like these two guys, if those tears are keeping Kenny and Charlie from saying to someone, your end is destruction.

You're turning your appetites into a God. The world is too much with you. If they're not willing, they have split apart what God means to be held together.

And so, my first exhortation is this. Negatively, I'll put it negative and positive. Beware of lopsided emotional responses to evil.

Beware of either or emotional life. That's the negative way to put it. Here's positive.

Seek to be as complex emotionally as Jesus and Paul. Embrace the both and life's emotional life. Both meaning tears and tough words.

The world has never seen such a thing. They know anger. Oh, they know evangelical anger.

And they know spineless, wimpy, emotionally-driven people who have no moral backbone. They know that. They don't know Paul.

They've never seen anything like this. Now, when I say be as complex as Jesus, Paul really did have the spirit of Jesus. Because remember, Jesus said, you may remember this.

He's in a synagogue. There's a man with a crippled hand. And they're watching him to see if he's going to heal on the Sabbath.

And he said, is it right to save life or to kill? Why would you put it like that? Is it right to do good or to do evil? And they won't even answer. I mean, how easy is that question? Kill? He won't answer. Jesus is furious at that silence.

But here's what Mark says. Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? And they were silent. And Jesus looked around on them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.

That's the complexity I'm pleading for in TCT churches. Anger, grieved. Anger, grieved.

Most of us, at least the person I know best, this person, most of us experience anger as an omnivore of emotional destruction, meaning it eats everything. If anger starts to take you over, no other emotions survive. It doesn't.

They don't survive. And many of your people grew up in homes. That's all they knew.

That's the only emotion. You say, was there a rich emotional life in your family growing up? Yeah. My dad was angry all the time.

And that just kills everything. They can't feel tenderness. They can't feel sweetness.

They can't feel authentic remorse. They can't feel joy. They can't feel hope.

Anger has eaten everything. Jesus could feel these two amazing emotions. Anger at this horrible silence.

You won't even say killing is wrong. And grieved. These are my people.

I came for them. And both ends. So that's exhortation number one.

Number two, beware of performance tears. Preachers, beware. Beware of planning the choke up moment in your sermon.

People can smell it. Beware of announcing your compassion for the latest calamity on Twitter. Grieving for the people in New Zealand.

Come on. Why? I mean, why is that a problem? Because Jesus said, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. You will have no reward.

And then he said this. When you fast, do not look gloomy. Now what does that mean? It means if you've been crying alone as you pray for your kids, and skipped a meal on Friday, and pouring out your heart, you wash your face before you walk out of that room.

He'll put it on Twitter. When you fast, anoint your head. Wash your face that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who sees in secret.

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Now here's the problem. Jesus said, don't virtue signal.

I'm virtuous, folks. I cry when there's a calamity. When there's a tornado in Oklahoma, I cry.

And Jesus said, don't do that. But Paul just did it in verse 18. He said, I'm crying.

He didn't have to say that. He could have said, oh, Jesus said not to say that. So I won't say it.

I won't say that as I'm writing this letter, I'm crying. And he said it. What are we to make of that? Is it ever right for a pastor to say, I have shed tears for this church? Is it ever right to say that? I think so.

So what's the difference? I mean, why is it OK for Paul to broadcast his tears and Jesus says, wash your face after you've been crying and fasting so only your Father knows about it? Here's my answer. I mean, this is my effort to spend most of my time trying to see unity in the Bible. And it's beautiful when you can see it.

I think the answer is motive and audience. Jesus said, don't practice your righteousness in order to be seen. That's a motive.

So if Paul's being driven by, I want some praise from the Philippians as a tenderhearted pastor. That's wicked. Paul did this more than once, right? Acts 20, 31.

Be alert, he says to the elders. Be alert. Remember that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

Three years I cried over you elders. Wow. He didn't have to say that.

He said that to them on the beach. Or 2 Corinthians 2. I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart with many tears. Not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love I have for you.

So my first answer is, when Paul wrote, I'm writing this now with tears, he wasn't trying to get praise. He was trying to tell them how much he loved them. How much he loved people.

How much he wanted them to be the kind of tenderhearted person. And the other is audience. Broadcasting your tears to the world is different than looking at a child.

I've wept for you, son. Or a church that you want to get your hands around and you just cannot not say what you feel, because they're your family. That's different.

So those are my two efforts to make sense out of Paul's saying that he was crying when he wrote this letter, and Jesus saying, wash your face so that you will be seen by God and not by man. So my exhortation is be discerning and beware of performance tears. The people can tell it when you're planning them.

Number three, don't equate physical tears with spiritual reality. All pastors know this. A person comes into your office, and everything is painful in their lives, because they've so messed up.

And they're crying. They're crying with everything they say. And as you talk and query and empathize, you can tell they're crying because of pain.

They're not crying because they're sorry for any sin they've committed. It's the consequence of their crime that they're painfully feeling, not the ugliness of their crime. And you have to be a discerning person to know when tears are tears that are holy and spiritual, because they're given by the Holy Spirit for empathy or for joy or for pain over your own failures or for longing for a loved one, a lot of good and holy reasons

that tears might well up.

And there are very worldly, carnal, merely human reasons that you might cry that has no spiritual value at all. I'll give you one example from the scriptures. Hebrews 12, Esau.

Don't be sexually immoral or unholy like Esau. He sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected.

For he found no place to repent, though he sought it with tears. Those were tears that were unholy. Esau had become so hardened in his heart against the preciousness of his inheritance that when he realized that he couldn't bring himself to actually repent, he wept.

And it counted for nothing. It was too late for Esau. So this is a general statement.

We've been through this at Bethlehem over the years as we've tried to discern the nature of spiritual reality in the charismatic dimensions. Like, is trembling, is warmth on the shoulder when somebody's praying for your healing, is the fluttering of an eyelash, is the wobbling of knees, is the falling down, is the laughing out loud, is the shouting, is the praying? Are all these manifestations holy? They might be. And they might not be.

There's nothing peculiarly spiritual or holy about anything physical. The movement of a muscle has no spiritual meaning unless it is prompted by a deeper work of the Holy Spirit, giving evidence of something within. That's crucial to realize when it comes to tears.

So number three, don't equate physical tears with spiritual reality. Number four, let it sink in and go deep that God's sovereignty over the evil that grieves us does not make us tearless, but sustains us in our tears. This is heavy, complex.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem. And he knew that the blindness of Jerusalem was decreed by God. Let me read it to you.

Luke 19, 41, when he drew near to the city, he wept over it. Just picture him. He's our authentic human, right? When he drew near to the city, he wept over it, saying, would that you had known on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

Now that passive verb, hidden, recalls chapter 10, I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes. He is weeping over the blindness of people who are blinded by God. And I've said this so many times.

Pastors have the impossible task, not just of contextualizing the gospel into the categories that humans bring to church. They've got to create categories. And this is one of them.

Nobody comes to your church with this category. Like, oh, if God decrees something, you might want to weep about it. Nobody comes with that category.

You've got to biblically help them see that category. Same thing with Paul, right? Here's Romans 9, 1 and 2. I am speaking the truth in Christ. I'm not lying.

My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit. And the reason he has to talk like that is because what he's about to say is so utterly counterintuitive. I'm speaking the truth in Christ.

I'm not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen, according to the flesh.

He is every day in sorrow and anguish for lost Jews. Sixteen verses later, he's going to say, God hardens whom He wills and He has mercy on whom He wills. And then in chapter 11, he's going to say, a hardness has come upon the people of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in.

And when the hardness is taken away, then all Israel will be saved. Same as Jesus. So, the point is, let it sink in that when our affirmation of faith that we love teaches the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God over all things, it does not mean we do not weep over many of them.

The weeping is just as appointed as whatever the pain is that has been decreed. The weeping is part of the proper divine response to the ordained sorrow and pain that's out there. That's number four.

Number five, let me check my time here. I don't even know how to do this phone. Okay, got three more that go quick.

Number five, when sadness makes life heavy with tears, don't stop doing your work. I'm thinking of pastors mainly, but it applies to all of you. Don't stop doing your work.

Take a deep breath, own the sorrow, trust the promise, wash your face, and go to work. I mean, we've worked together a long time, Kenny, and probably, I see the Yeagers back there. Someone's been together for 38 years.

And so, we have memories. This is so hard, I don't think I can go to work. This is so hard, I don't think I can enter into that controversy.

This is too hard. Here's what I think Psalm 126.5 means. It says, those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. Now, before you do any spiritualizing with that verse, just let it mean for the farmer what it means. Farmer, it's sowing time, and you're a farmer on the plains 200 years ago, and there's nobody living within 10 miles of you, and your wife found a strange lump in her breast, and your oldest child died three weeks ago, and you can hardly continue, and you know, if we don't plant, we don't eat.

You don't have time for a grief break. Go plant your seed. That's what this verse is about, and it's an illustration of just life.

Every one of you will walk into painful situations where the tears are flowing, and you've got to get up, wash your face, no denial, own the pain, believe a promise, take a step in faith. He's gonna get me through this day, and that's the way the ministry survives. That's the way you keep going, and he brings you out, he brings you out in due time, and you get testimonies like these men who've walked through deep waters, and they're able to smile and be radiant before us.

How can that be? Because God is faithful. Number six, pray that God will give you holy tears. They are a work of grace, not a work of nature.

Natural tears are sweet, but holy tears are from the Spirit. So I'm just asking myself here now, if you're listening to me, or if John Piper reads what I see in the Bible and realizes I'm a compassionate, deficit human being, I'm not as tender-hearted as I ought to be, what should I do? And I've spent most of my pastoral ministry praying to be a different kind of person. I don't believe in fatalism, like, oh, you're an introvert, you don't need to like anybody.

Baloney. Don't you believe in the Holy Spirit? No, so the question is, if you read all this, if you hear me and you say, well, I never cry. I haven't cried for 15 years.

I don't ever feel anything like that. What should you do? And I'm saying, ask for them. So I went, I said, that's all I know to do is ask, is there a place in the Bible that says that? Like, I don't wanna just infer that that's the way it should be.

I want God to tell me that's the way it should be. And so here's the verse for you to consider. It's translated like this.

This is Jeremiah 9.1. Oh, that my head were waters and my eyes, a fountain of tears that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. Now, I said, okay, is that a prayer? Is that a prayer? So I went to the Hebrew and the Hebrew says this very literally. Who will give my head waters? Who will give my eyes springs of tears? That is a Hebraic way of saying, somebody's got to, because I can't do it.

Somebody's gotta give me this. I can't make these tears happen. I can't become another kind of emotional person than I grew up being.

No, you can't, but God can. And so if you have no holy tears, you should ask for them. That's my sixth point.

And here's my last point. Rejoice in hope that one day all painful tears will be wiped away from the faces of God's children. Revelation 21, four.

He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. So into this political milieu of polarization and hostility and outrage, don't line up with this side or this side.

Look to God for a kind of emotional engagement that the world simply will consider extraordinary. So Father, I love the treasuring Christ together vision, the churches, the doctrine, the 10-point statement of church life, the camaraderie among the pastors, the growing fellowship among the people, the blessings that you pour out in hard times and good times. And I thank you for them.

And I pray that you'd give all these churches holy tears. I pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

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