

“Blessed Are Those Who Mourn”

by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

“I wish it weren’t so.” How many times could we appropriately use those words? A parent sees his daughter doing something that incurs the wrath of her friends, and can feel a sadness well up inside of himself at the hard lesson his child is learning. He didn’t want it to happen, but it did. He can now comfort and instruct, but he may not be able to take away all the pain that his daughter feels.

A mother is aware of many facets in her son’s marriage that aren’t going well. She may see two people that she cares deeply about heading down the path toward divorce, and there’s not a whole lot she can do about it. She, too, can feel that tremendous sadness, and sense the impact of those words, “I wish it weren’t so.”

Almost every day we can turn on the news and hear reports of some tragedy—a plane crash, a shooting, a child molester caught, only after he had abused many innocent children. In one sense we can steel ourselves to these reports, choosing not to let them get to us. Yet if we were to put ourselves in the shoes of any one of those people, we could again see so clearly how applicable those words are, “I wish it weren’t so.” I wish that child hadn’t been abused. I wish that person’s father hadn’t been killed.

Then there is an introspective way to look at those words. Each of us could look within ourselves and find several things that we wish weren’t the way they are. “I wish I made more time for the ones I love.” “I wish I wasn’t so impulsive in the things I say to people.” “I wish I hadn’t made that mistake all those years ago.” “I wish I was a better parent.” “I wish I could find the wisdom to repair the friendship that’s gone so awry.”

Truly there is a lot to mourn for, in our world, in the lives of the people we care about, in ourselves. But today, I want to suggest that this can be *good!* There is a usefulness in seeing the way things should *not* be, and in mourning those things. Now, it should be pointed out that not all mourning is healthy. Our perspectives can easily be clouded by self-pity, or even by plain old selfishness, mourning the fact that someone else didn’t do what we wanted them to do, or that people didn’t pay as much attention as they should have to the way we want things to be. We are also not talking so much about external things—sadness over the way we look, or the things we can’t afford. Rather we’re talking about mourning over real evil in ourselves, and in the world around us. It is this kind of mourning that I believe the Lord is talking about when He says those words from His Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (*Matthew 5:4*).

“Blessed are those who mourn...” What an interesting phrase. I love the way the Lord teaches, for He so often uses phrases that make us stop and think about what’s going on. It almost sounds as though we should seek out ways to mourn in order to receive the Lord’s blessing. But why would we want to do that? Who wants to feel unhappy? Isn’t mourning a word we associate with death, unhappiness, tragedy, crying, suffering? What could be “blessed” about that?

Perhaps a way to start to understand the impact of these words is to think of the opposite. Take a person who isn't bothered by evil in the world around him. Is he an amazingly centered person, or is he merely ignorant of some of the things the Lord would want for this world? Or what of a person who is totally content with herself, and sees nothing needing changing. Is that a person the Lord can lead? Can we not see that it is healthy to notice what is out of order, and even to feel an inner aversion to it? Is that not an emotion within which the Lord can work—to inspire, to effect change, to comfort, and to give a sense of hope that things can be better?

The point, I believe, is not that we should seek out the state of mourning, but rather that in the process of trying to be a person who is growing spiritually, there will be mourning. We will see things that are not the way they should be—in ourselves and in the world around us. There is a teaching in the book of the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church called the *True Christian Religion* which describes people who don't want to see evil in themselves or the world around them. It says of these people that “if any evil is uncovered by someone else they employ the rational faculty to conceal it, like a snake hiding its head and plunging it into the dust” (*True Christian Religion* 564). I don't want to make too much of this analogy, but it's interesting that a snake plunging its head into the ground is used in this context. A person who is not trying to become a better person, who does not care about spiritual things, will tend to get very defensive about the implication that something is wrong with him or her. The default mode of such a person is to use the cunning of the rational mind—all his or her “smarts”—to excuse or justify what someone else has pointed out as a problem. Do we not sometimes think of a snake as a symbol of cunning and craftiness which would perfectly symbolize this activity? And doesn't it make sense that the thrust of this kind of reasoning is like burying your head in the dirt—a total unwillingness to see anything wrong with yourself. Truly, this is not the kind of state the Lord can work with, for such a person coils against Him, instead of cooperating.

Now let's take the opposite example of a young man who does care about becoming a better person. Say he is preparing to get married, and in the process of discovering about marriage he comes to understand for the first time why the sexual act appropriately belongs in the context of marriage and nowhere else. As is so often the case today, this person has led a somewhat promiscuous life—mainly because he didn't know what the big deal was. But now he sees the trust, the free expression of love, the cementing of all the inner qualities of the relationship that that act is intended to embody. And he mourns his past indiscretions. He may realize that he will face challenges because of those other experiences he's had—memories that he'd just as soon not have in his mind. He may look at the world around him from this new-found perspective and see so many other people falling into the trap he found himself in—getting themselves entangled in relationships that lead to suffering. He knows the impact of the words, “I wish it weren't so.”

And yet, can we not see that this mourning is a healthy thing? Is not the Lord able to build within this young man a love for what is pure in marriage, a commitment to strive for that purity, a strength to combat any illicit longings he might later have in this area? This person is someone, to use another passage from the Heavenly Doctrine, who has received “some light from the Lord through heaven,” and is willing “to go to war” with his natural inclinations, for he has caught sight of a “joy which defies description,” which he now sees could be his (see *Arcana Coelestia* 5650). He is far from a snake who buries its head in the dust. Instead he is a person who is growing spiritually—someone the Lord can lead to a better life than the one he had led before.

I believe it is this kind of situation that the Lord calls us to think about when we hear those words, “Blessed are those who mourn.” It’s not the state of mourning that’s the goal. It’s where that mourning can lead.

Something of the Lord’s perspective. With that in mind, let’s turn to our reading from the book of Isaiah, which more clearly shows the Lord’s part in all of this. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor...to heal the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion...” (Isaiah 61:1,2,3). We learn that these words are a prophecy for the Lord’s birth into this world, and if we look at the things He did as recorded in the gospels He truly did come to preach good tidings and to comfort so many people who were suffering (see *Arcana Coelestia* 893; *Apocalypse Explained* 684:9). Indeed, teaching people in His Sermon on the Mount is an example of this activity, as were all of His healing miracles. More broadly, these words in Isaiah represent His constant activity, and the perspective from which He acts today and always.

To gain a greater perspective on the Lord’s love, we turn to the short collection of readings from the *Arcana Coelestia* relating to the Lord’s mercy. The first reminds us that the Lord Himself “mourns” for us. It says that the Lord’s mercy is love that is grieving (n. 5480). Another reminds us that the Lord “has a perception and knowledge of every single thing” in a passage which explains the Biblical words “I have indeed seen the affliction of My people” (n. 6851; *Exodus* 3:7). A third reminds us that the Lord has an intense “love toward the whole human race, a love which is ‘mercy’ because the whole human race is in distress” (n. 5132). From that great love, and from His omnipresent perspective, the Lord sees every single detail of our lives that is not the way it should be, and He grieves. He mourns in a more profound way than we could imagine.

Yet the Lord’s grief is not the emotion of a God who can do little to change what He sees, for as the passage in Isaiah indicates, His whole energy is devoted to making a difference. He strives to “comfort those who mourn,” “to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:2,3). It is in this context that we can be reminded of the Lord’s providence. For He perceives every step we take to deviate from the path to salvation, and works “at every moment, or at every step...[to] direct, bend and dispose [us] in accordance with [His] laws by withdrawing [us] from evil and leading [us] to good” (*Divine Providence* 234). The Lord has a love that never stops trying to bring healing, never ceases to use any small opportunity to turn sadness into joy. He is working, in thousands of ways which we will never see, to bend us in freedom to wiser ways of life, and to diminish the pain we feel when suffering touches us.

How can we feel comforted? So finally we turn our minds to how we can receive some of that mercy. What can we do to feel some of the “blessing” the Lord longs so much to give us when we are in states of mourning?

1. Trust in the Lord. So often people can feel their belief and trust in the Lord eroded by the evil they see around them, thinking within themselves, “How could a loving God allow such things to happen?” He does allow them, but that doesn’t in any way diminish His love and power! It will only help to open ourselves up to believe in an abundantly merciful God who is intimately aware

of every person experiencing sadness, ourselves included, and who acts in so many ways to lead away from that sadness.

2. *Learn more!* It follows that the more we understand about the Lord and His ways, the more we will be able to trust in Him—to believe in His mercy. Furthermore, the more we learn, the more we will be able to cooperate. In one sense, we might complain that such learning will only lead us to see more that causes us to mourn. And, yes, that can happen. But as we learn, we may also see new ways in which we can do something about the problems! For ourselves, we may see how to get untangled from some of the habits that have caused us to do things we regret. For others, we may see subtle ways we can be a good friend. In either case, the knowledge of the way things are supposed to be, and the understanding of how to get there can “calm a turbulence of mind with a sense of hope” (see *Arcana Coelestia* 4783).

3. *Look for something good in the situations we see.* It is a principle of the Lord’s providence that He does not allow anything to happen out of which He cannot bring some good (*Arcana Coelestia* 6489). If we truly believe what the Lord says, we can look for those good things, even in the worst of tragedies, and be sure that His hand is working, even there, to bring comfort out of mourning.

4. *Strive to make a difference, even if it is small.* One person might lament, “I wish the church that I love was thriving more than it is.” Healthy questions such a person could ask are, “What can I do about it? How can I make a difference?” Another person might feel a deep sadness that life is too busy for him to have a solid relationship with his children. In response to the awareness that something important is going unheeded in his life, is he willing to make an effort to change the situation? Whenever we see something that causes us to mourn, the next logical step is for us to consider what we can do about it. So, send a note, apologize, promise the Lord with a sense of conviction to strive to do better next time, give of your wisdom to others, have the courage to get involved in ugliness with the goal of fighting the tide, talk to people about the way you wish things were, and so on. By doing these things, we will be more closely emulating the mercy of the Lord, which causes Him to act in so many ways to make things better for all who suffer.

5. *And if nothing else, trust that the Lord is leading us to a place where tragedies do not happen, and where evil is not so powerful. He calls it heaven.*

Truly there is a lot to mourn in our world, and in ourselves. Yet if we keep in mind the simple phrase of the Lord, “Blessed are those who mourn,” we may be able to come to a sense of peace about it all. May we grow in our understanding of the Lord and His ways—of the way He intends things to be, and of how we can participate in His work of making this world a better place. May we find the strength to lament publicly when there is a use, to laugh when it’s appropriate to laugh, to silently resolve to change what is in our power to change. And may we trust that the Lord will use all of our efforts to bring comfort out of mourning.

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-3; Matthew 5:1-10; *Arcana Coelestia* 5480, 6851, 5132