

# Bread of Tears

Psalm 80, Ps. 56:8-11, Ps. 84, Ps. 30, Ps. 42:1-5, Ps. 116:8-9

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**Introduction:** So sorry if today's sermon title doesn't look too promising – may not be what you were hoping to hear at church today. How can we focus on tears today after Madrid won the UEFA Championship last night? Maybe chalk it up to birthday blues? Or the perspective of an old preacher entering his 76<sup>th</sup> year with a somewhat heavy heart over so many clouds on the horizon! Did you ever notice how full Scripture is of weeping and tears? They are a veritable river running through it (sometimes a roaring river!), because Scripture doesn't ignore any part of life, much less its deepest sorrows and anguish. Jeremiah's anguish is a key example: *"Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people"* (Jer. 9:1); *"let tears stream down like a torrent day and night!"* (Lam. 3:18). So he was known as the weeping prophet. But plenty of other main characters in Scripture are portrayed at different moments in their lives as weeping, from Abraham and the other patriarchs to the people of Israel in general, other prophets, and especially the psalmists! Why do they describe this life as a *"Valley of Tears"*? Why is there so much suffering and evil? What is the lesson of our tears? These hard questions evade easy answers, but Scripture's descriptions of the darker side of human existence are both painful and realistic. Those descriptions square up with the misery and sorrow we find on every page of our history, and even on the pages of our own lives. The tragedies people live through so constantly on the world scene were highlighted in this past week's news – without mentioning all the hidden tragedies that take place around us every day that can make us numb to the brokenness ("compassion fatigue"). But for a vast majority of the world's population, eating the "bread of tears" is a daily experience. OK, so we don't want to get stuck there! Yet it feels like our world is stuck there!

**1)** So I trust you noticed that verse in our Scripture reading this morning that said, *"You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure"* (Ps. 80:5). The Hebrew word for tears, *"dimah,"* along with its verb form *"dama,"* to weep, makes 25 appearances in the Old Testament. This psalm is Asaph's writing, one of David and Solomon's chief musicians heading up the worship team in the temple. And in this first section of the psalm his prayer focuses on a plea for restoration: *"Restore us, O God"* (v. 3). This petition serves as the chorus of the psalm, repeated two more times with the name of God growing each time: *"God of hosts"* (v. 7) and *"YHWH God of hosts"* (v. 19). "Restore" reflects the Hebrew *shuv*, also translated as repent, turn back, followed by a second line: *"let your face shine that we may be saved"* (cf. Num. 6:24). Asaph has the impression that God is presently looking with disfavor on Israel, **angry with His people's prayers!** Have you ever felt God was angry with your prayers? Is God the one who's gotten off track, or are we? Are we praying in accord with His will and glory, or just seeking personal fulfillment (often so characteristic of our prayer life)? Paul reminds us that we don't know how to pray as we ought (Rom. 8:26), which makes a good [confession](#) for us. We are life-long learners, so we must not get discouraged! This OT worship leader felt like God was angry with their prayers, giving them *"bread of tears"* to eat (this may be a reference to their daily weeping, or even their crying instead of eating), followed up with *"drinking tears"* as well,

suggesting the full measure of their brokenness. But Asaph is addressing their desperate plight to God as Shepherd and he's primarily pleading for restoration! Other clues from later in the psalm will be addressed afterward.

2) Similar examples are found in other psalms: In **Ps. 56:8**, when David was suffering persecution from the Philistines, he asked God to save his tears in a bottle, to record them in His book! We shouldn't think there's an actual bottle or a literal book, but David is confident that God is a tender-hearted, trustworthy Father who truly cares about his suffering. So he makes this confession: ***"This I know, that God is for me..."*** [cf. Rm. 8:31]. ***In Yahweh, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere humans do to me?"*** (vv. 9b-11). What *can* humans do to me? We think of neighbors like Russia and the Ukraine, or Israel and Gaza, to think of how of badly neighbors can act toward each other. Or we think of family members and the abuse that can happen in intimate circles! Sometimes the persecution between humans becomes violent and fatal, like what happened to a Christian brother named Lazrus last weekend in Pakistan (the 80-year-old gentleman became a martyr in Pakistan last weekend when they attacked him and others for "blasphemy"). There are those who live daily with this kind of threat: can they continue confessing that God is FOR them while walking through the Vale of Tears? (*vallis lacrimarum*).

**Ps. 84:5-6:** ***"Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage."*** This is the mindset necessary for those of us who know *we are only passing through!* ***"As they go through the Valley of Tears, they make it a place of springs."*** In other words, in order to make it a place of springs, one must realize his or her status as a pilgrim. "Tears" in this case translates the Hebrew *baka* = to weep (116 occurrences). As Israelites did their annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem, many had to pass through this dry region (a ***"weary weepy place"***), but their hearts were set on the journey to Jerusalem (as in vv. 1-2: ***"How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty; my soul yearns, even faints for the courts of YHWH; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."*** This is what it means to have the heart set on pilgrimage! As Duane Miller mentioned to us last week, describing the pilgrimage that the Israelites practiced from all over the promised land heading to Jerusalem, they were like little streams coming together, growing into a mighty river. This meant their hearts were full of this confession: ***"For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness"*** (v. 10). In King David's dedicatory psalm for the temple, this is his confidence: ***"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning!"*** (**Ps. 30:5**). Tears will NOT have the last word. In fact, David ends this psalm with beautiful praise to God: ***"You turned my wailing into dancing. You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, forever will I give thanks to you"*** (vv. 11-12). It's the same pattern in **Ps. 42**, where the Sons of Korah mourn and lament: ***"My tears have been my bread day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"*** But that's never to be the last word. Let his last word become our confession: ***"Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why so disturbed within me? Hope in God; for I will again praise him, my Savior and my God"*** (v. 5). Do you see how full the psalms are with this pattern? This is to be the pattern in our souls as well! It was Jesus' pattern – because His soul was saturated with the psalms!

3) So let's go back to Ps. 80 and pick up on other clues from that psalmist's hope. V. 8 begins to talk about a transplanted vine from Egypt, clearly a reference to when God rescued the children of Israel from their bondage. God drove out other nations to plant Israel in their place; He cleared the ground, the vine took root, filled the land, covered the mountains, reached to the sea (vv. 9-11). But then something went awry: the psalmist suggests that God broke down its protective wall (though we know from the Bible's fuller account that this happened because Israel abandoned the protection of God's covenant and law); so every passerby was plucking grapes from it, wild boars were ravaging it, insects were eating it up. The vine was being cut down and burned with fire. So the psalmist begins to beg for mercy and restoration to favor. And the wording of his petition is most interesting: ***"Let your hand rest***

*on the man at your right hand, the Son of Man you have raised up for yourself. Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name”* (vv. 17-18). Within the textual context the reference is to Israel itself as that “man” at God’s right hand, but within the larger theological context, the reference is clearly messianic: that Son of Man that would come one day as Redeemer of Israel and the world, and He would even claim to be the True Vine (Jn. 15:1)!

That Messiah who eventually came centuries later would teach us that the Bible’s most important response to our tears is that God Himself weeps with us and over us personally. In the incarnation we discover Jesus’ tears and suffering (Heb. 5:7), a reflection of His deep compassion for the stray sheep He came to seek and save, as well as of His Spirit’s groaning on our behalf (Rom. 8:26). They have a deep redeeming power that we could never have imagined. In fact, His very life would be crushed by humanity’s anger and rebellion, like the crushing of grapes that produces the wine, which He would compare to His life blood being poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. He was assuming our burden into Himself and rescuing us from utter despair over our sin, our losses and tragedies. The Creator Himself entered fully into our Valley of Weeping, eating the bread of tears Himself! He was at home with tears: with the woman who washed His feet with her tears, His own tears at Lazarus’ tomb and on the approach to Jerusalem. He understood the real motives for weeping: not just our world’s hurting, but our false worship that’s at the root of it all. My deepest [confession](#) needs to be regarding my own tendency to idolatry as the most lamentable thing in my life! How we have idolized power and wealth, image and prestige, beauty and the cult of the body, comfort and recreation – things that do not edify us spiritually, much less rescue or save us!

**Conclusion:** The tragedies of human existence will not end in some human utopia: Jesus’ prediction (in Mt. 24) was that **all the worst in our history will continue unabated until His return!** The human trafficking, drug wars, refugee crisis (will only bring more tears); the deconstruction of marriage and family, the human identity crisis, the crisis of transgenderism in the public education system and the sexualization of children (bringing still more tears); rampant consumerism and materialism, the crisis of faith, the crisis of warring nations and global leadership, political demagoguery and professional indifference, the yawning gap between our ideals and our realities (producing still more tears). The standard of truth and justice has been shredded a bit more by every passing generation to such an extent that human history only promotes more broken dreams, value systems, and false hopes, leading to more broken families and societies, where old wounds just keep coming back to haunt us, like a reactivated volcano!

We can’t close our eyes to the long history of human weeping. But if God weeps with us, it has serious implications regarding the church’s calling, which is to weep with the world! Rom. 12:15 says that we are to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. To groan with the Holy Spirit is to help wipe away the tears of those around us, learning to do this as an expression of God’s compassion ... and of God’s promise ultimately to wipe away all our tears (Rev. 21). How do we do this? By treating our wounds at the foot of the cross, so we can help others do the same, standing with those who are hurting, enfleshing the Good News in the lives of others!

Final [confession](#): ***“You, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living”*** (Ps. 116:8-9).