

## House Of Mourning

### Circumcision of the Heart Through Sorrow

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It was over 30 years ago in my life, but I remember it just like it was yesterday. Every summer morning I had to complete my assigned chores with my grandfather before I could go out and play with all my friends. Over the years, he turned this half-acre former used car lot into the most productive vegetable garden I have ever seen, and he did it all through child labor. We spent countless hours shoveling dirt through a screen, only to remove the stones so we could shove the dirt right back to where it came from—one shovel at a time. All that soil prep, the planting, the weeding, the watering, I felt like I was in a bit of a prison camp. It was only a few hours a day, mind you, but it felt like an eternity as I knew all my friends were out there playing, and I had to finish before I could get out there with them.

But it was a mid-summer afternoon on this day when I heard my dad's loud, alarming yell and quickly ran to follow him back to Granddad's house. We were there in the room as he confirmed Granddad had died in his afternoon nap; and it was my first painful sting of death. And at that moment, I would have given anything just to go back to prison camp for just a little while with my grandfather. Several years later, as a freshman in college, the second sting hit pretty hard as my fraternity brother, John, dove into a pond and never resurfaced.

Shortly after, the big one. This one is tough to get through. My dad died during what was supposed to be a somewhat routine surgery, and three decades later it is still painful, right? Hard to talk about. So tragic it tore our tight-knit family apart for a long time. But looking back now, 30 years later through a different lens, I can now see that it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. How ironic is that? I never thought I would be able to say that. But it forced me to step up, grow up. It forced me to become more self-aware, to have a sense of urgency in life, realizing that just like that, life can be gone, but most importantly, it opened up the door to my calling many years later.

Shortly after coming into the church, a happier moment: we had young baby Sam. She cried a lot, but she made us happy. But we also had a lot of debt, and we were struggling quite a bit, and we received a package in the mail that was perfect timing. It was slightly used baby clothes from someone we had never met. You probably guessed. That is how I first met Dan and Carol [Fletcher]. But since then I have gotten a lot more from Dan. His faithful example. His incredible smile through it all. His great attitude has really inspired us all.

All this experience with the painful sting of death is tough, and we have had more than our share as of late. I could go on to list the many family members that we are all grieving. But I was reminded last night when I got some encouragement from my family that, unlike David Grabbe, I have been never known to be short on words. So I better move on in order to leave Kim some time.

Now, we have been given a choice, right? We would all like to avoid pain and sorrow in our lives. None of us wake up one morning and say, "Man, I hope I get some grief today, some big disappointments, a severe trial or two. Maybe someone I really love will die today." Nor do we ever think, "Today is a great day for me to die." No, our human nature downright prefers happiness and fun. In fact, we go to great lengths to avoid all pain, suffering. This is a huge battle that we all have. A huge battle, and it is the underlying root cause of many sins. Let us just looking at a few examples.

We want to avoid the pain of self-discipline and denial, perhaps the pain of not sleeping in. And we do not want to follow Dr. Maas' advice to eat right and exercise. It is painful to do that, right? We have got to bring ourselves and control ourselves into alignment with that. It is painful, so we do not do it. We just avoid it. We want to avoid the pain of humbling ourselves in controlling our tongue, esteeming others better than ourselves, so we avoid it. We do not do it. We want to avoid the pain of properly prioritizing our lives, our time, and our resources on first things, so we do not do it. You could fill in the blank here. The sin that remains in our life is there probably for one main reason: we have yet truly to mourn it.

Yes, our carnal hearts are filled with the selfish way of get. We know this. We want, no, make that we *deserve*, to do what we want when we want, and nobody is going to tell us what to do. We do not want to let God be God, to say it simply. Turn with me to Ecclesiastes 7, where we are going to begin today. I was going to start somewhere else, but this came in via the Berean this weekend. It is a perfect fit.

**Ecclesiastes 7:1-4** A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth; better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Now, John Ritenbaugh packs these scriptures for us in his summary sermon, "Ecclesiastes and Christian Living, Part 14." It came in the Berean just this week, and it was perfect timing, as I said. Solomon is basically telling us, and I am going to paraphrase John here,

We must prepare for our death. In our youth, we often overlook the reality of approaching death as we focus on the present. But as we get older and have more experience with death, we give it more careful thought. All sunshine makes a desert, our pastor once said, as a good reminder that we all need a little bit of rain in our lives to grow. We do not enjoy it. We do not want it. But we learn more from the difficult times than from the times we would consider good and fun. Painful times force us to consider our ways, examine the consequences of our daily choices, and make the necessary corrections. Fun, on the other hand, that influences us to just stay the way we are right. Everything is great. Fun, fun, fun! No reason to change. The wise person's heart disciplines him or her to make profitable use of difficult times while those in the house of fools consistently look for fun, fun, fun.

So Solomon makes it clear that we must attentively consider what God is teaching us through the tough events of death and sorrow in our lives. For

when we deeply reflect and consider, only then can our hearts be made better. Now, we know our biblical heart is representative of our entire being, right? It is the combination of thoughts, attitudes, emotions, desires, all of which that drive our actions. In Deuteronomy 30 God promises to circumcise the heart of His people so that we will love the Lord our God with all our heart. And wow, if we could only just do that, how great would life be.

The B.L.O.T., the bottom line on top for today's message: God uses the painful sting of death, trial, and sorrow to circumcise our evil hearts and teach us His godly wisdom.

Let us turn to Matthew 5 as we pick up a little steam here. We are heading to, you probably guessed it, the Beattitudes, and we know that these are more likely a summary of key teachings versus this one-time perfect summary speech given from a mountaintop. They are the "Be"-attitudes, as I like to call them. The attitudes and characteristics of God's children. These were given just after Jesus began His ministry.

**Matthew 5:4** "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Now we have learned before the Greek word translated "blessed" throughout the Beatitudes is *makarios*, *Strong's* 3107, meaning to be divinely joyful, delighted, and fortunate. We can contrast this to our English word "happiness," which is really dependent on the happenings around us. We are happy when we get what we want, when we have good times and fun. But *makarios* is not dependent on these external circumstances. It is a blessing, a pleasant feeling of joy. It is given through God's Holy Spirit, and it comes *to us* from God, right?

Happiness comes from the outside world that we experience. *Makarios* comes to us through God, through His Spirit within our heart and within our mind. And we also know that the Beatitudes are all in the present tense. They are not past tense. In other words, they are not a "do it once and you are done" type activity. And this parallels our walk, right? Our walk to become Godlike is not a "once and done" activity. It is an every day, all day event. These godly attributes, here in the Beatitudes, must be continuously lived and experienced in our lives each day. So we can restate the second

Beatitude to read something like this: Blessed are those who *continually* mourn.

The Greek word translated mourn is *pentheo*, *Strong's 3996*, meaning just that, to mourn, grieve, lament, and even wail out loudly, tears. There are multiple applications of mourning that we are going to explore here briefly today.

We have the mourning over death and suffering in our lives. We have the mourning over the state of the evil world we live in, and we have the mourning over our sin and the direct role that *we* played in our Savior's death. The key here is, in order for us to be blessed from mourning, we must have it lead to change in our lives. There is a natural grief in a mourning that comes from death and severe trials. But that mourning and that sorrow must become more than just a physical thing, more than just emotional pain. We have got to use it to evaluate ourselves, come before God, discipline ourselves, allow Him to use it to circumcise our hearts so that we can take the time to deeply reflect, change, and grow in godly wisdom.

Let us turn over to II Corinthians 7 and hear from brother Paul. And while you are turning, I am going to read Psalm 119:67, 71, 75 (which David read a few weeks back). "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your word. . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. . . I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are right and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me."

Let us read what Paul has to say. We are going to pick up in verse 9. But we should note that back in verse 4, Paul states, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation." And that fits in here perfectly.

**II Corinthians 7:9-11** Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire,

what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Paul reinforces here that godly sorrow produces repentance and it produces change that leads to salvation. But worldly sorrow stops with a self-focused emotion which leads to death. In his previous letter, Paul had scolded the Corinthians, and here they responded appropriately. They felt a real sorrow for what they had done, and they felt sorrow for the impact that sin had on their relationship with God. It led them to a repentance and a change of attitude and conduct, and Paul says their godly sorrow drove diligence, zeal, repentance, and a change of heart so that they would never make that same mistake again.

Our mourning and sorrow can lead us to repentance. But we have to take the next step: to develop a change of mind that contains a resolve never to repeat that mistake again. We must approach God's throne in humility, right? We mourn, we grieve. We can become heartsick for the sin that God has allowed us to see and the major role that we personally played in our Savior's death, and we ask Him for forgiveness, in tears. We ask for His help to develop in us such a deep disgust of that sin that we will never do it again. And then we commit to Him, as part of repentance, that we are going to change. We are going to work harder, we are going to overcome, and we are going to use His strength to overcome, because He promises to give it to us when we ask for it.

Please turn with me to Ezekiel 9 as we start to examine a little bit of the sorrow we have for the world. And as you are turning, I hold a small stone in my hand from Germany. If the stone could speak, it would tell of the atrocities it witnessed from 1933-1945.

Dachau served as a prototype and a model for other German concentration camps that followed, and I have read about it many times. I have seen movies about it. I have seen documentaries. But as I walked through the gas chambers, the large ovens, as I saw firsthand the horrible conditions that the over 200,000 prisoners faced, I cried hard. I could not understand, I still cannot understand how someone could do something so horrible and then turn around and walk right down the street to the nice brick home that was built for them, to their family, with the kids playing in the backyard. And

then it dawned on me. That is how they did it, right? They did it because they did not want to face the pain and suffering that would come on them and on their families if they did not fall in line and do those horrible sins and things to those peoples.

We are no doubt all outraged by Dachau, but I wonder how often does Satan use our evil hearts to trick us into accepting sin because we want to avoid suffering, too.

**Ezekiel 9:4-6** and the Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it." To the others, He said in my hearing, "Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the temple.

As Charles Whitaker explained in "The Torment of the Godly" series, "Those people who sighed and cried somehow found a place of safety from all that terror. They had God's mark on them. Get that, read that. They had God's mark on them, protecting them from His judgment. Sighing and crying over the abominations and the sins of the largest society then, must be enormously important to us too, as we also stand on the brink of similar tribulation."

Many people obviously speculate about the mark of the beast, that we should try to avoid the mark of the beast. But here we learn we have God's mark, right? We learn that one of the things that represents God's mark is sorrow, right? Repentance, sorrow, mourning. If we have God's mark, by default I would say you do not have Satan's mark. Those that have God's mark of sorrow then are protected. They are, indeed, eternally blessed. The mark of God represents a deep repentance, sorrow, for both our individual sins and the sins within the world that we live. The mark of God is humility and sorrow, and it stands in contrast with the mark of the beast. Those with God's

mark are literally disgusted. They mourn over all the sin and injustice in the world. And they cry out to God, asking for Him to establish His Kingdom here on earth and to help us make ready for Christ's return.

Please turn with me to Matthew 12 as we continue. Now as Jesus begins His ministry, recorded in Luke 4:18, He makes it clear as He quotes Isaiah 61 in terms of why He was coming. He says, "He [God] has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the oppressed." These are His first words as He starts His ministry.

In Matthew 12, after healing a man's hand on the Sabbath, we find the Pharisees are rising up to confront Him. But what does He do? Does He confront them? No, He withdraws from the conflict. And then Matthew quotes from Isaiah 42, to explain why Jesus had retreated. He was not here on earth to fulfill their expectation of a Messiah to conquer their physical enemies and restore the physical kingdom. No, He was here to achieve a much greater purpose. A spiritual victory for us to help us conquer our evil hearts.

**Matthew 12:18-20** "Behold! My servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory."

Let us unpack verse 20 because this applies to us. The reed is a tall, grasslike plant that grows typically in the wetlands. It is easily blown over by the wind, in contrast to a strong oak tree. We are, in many ways, like that weak reed that cannot on its own bear up against the calamities and the temptations of life here on earth. Our carnal nature is indeed very weak. And yet our stubborn pride causes us to want to remain upright and stiff-necked, right? Prideful.

A bruised or broken reed is one that has been blown over by a storm. It has been crushed or bent by a sense of sin, calamity, and affliction. We are blown over but still attached, and He is merciful. He will not break us off.



We see it here as an emblem of a mournful soul, regretting our sin and repenting. Our merciful Savior will not trample us as a broken reed. He says, no, when we return to Him and repent, He gives us strength and heals us. We can tie this to Isaiah, 61:1 and Isaiah 54. He will heal the brokenhearted (we read that a second ago), and He knows how to encourage him who is weary.

The complementary image here, used in verse 20, is of a smoking flax. This also represents us. The smoking flax represents the wick of an oil lamp running very low on oil. The flame is flickering as it dries out from the lack of oil, and it starts to smoke. The image here is that after severe anguish and oppression we are beaten down, we are weak, we are feeble, we are disheartened. Our faith and love in God is failing and the result is our flame burning out. Our spiritual life is on the verge of being extinguished or quenched.

And again, we see the merciful Savior will not be harsh in His judgment. For He tells us in Hebrews 5, He suffered here on earth too and He knows what we are going through. As we repent from our faithlessness and return to Him, He provides His oil—the oil of His Holy Spirit—to our smoking flax. He rekindles our flame into once again a bright blaze.

Let us tie this now into some admonition from brother James in chapter 4.

**James 4:6-9** Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

We can tie this right back to Matthew 5 as we draw near to God with a true pure heart full of deep sorrow, repentance for our prideful attitude and the sin that killed our Savior. He draws near to us. He lifts us up like that broken reed and restores us.

**James 4:10** Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

**James 4:13-15** Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

James warning applies to us all. Even the poorest among us have a tendency to prioritize physical things in this life over the most important things to our spiritual life. God's gift of life is precious—here today, gone tomorrow. And when we reflect on the painful sting of death, we are reminded that life ends suddenly, and often unexpectedly. We know we all have an allocated amount of time to grow and mature, as Paul puts it, to come into the measure and stature of the fullness of Christ. We do not know how much time is left, so we have to use our time wisely to constantly make progress towards growing in God's image.

Let us turn to Psalm 90 now.

**Psalm 90:12** So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

We can tie this right back to where we started in Ecclesiastes, right? God uses the painful experience of death and sorrow to circumcise our hearts so that we can develop His wisdom. When we deeply reflect and consider the death of a loved one we are brought face to face to the reality that our days are numbered too. And we must use these painful experiences to evaluate ourselves, develop better time management, and make changes to draw nearer to God. We must, as brother Clyde told us at the Feast, make conscious choices to put the big rocks in first in those daily jars of time. As Dr. Maas reminded us recently, if we do not schedule time, time schedules us. Paul tells us:

**Ephesians 5:14-16** "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

Again, we can tie this perfectly back into Ecclesiastes 7. The wise person's heart disciplines them to make profitable use of difficult times, while those in the house of fools are constantly preoccupied with fun.

Let us turn to I Peter 4 as we start to wind down. We have all experienced a lot of sorrow as of late. We are comforted to know, as brother Clyde reminded us just recently, our fellow family members may be sleeping, but they are alive in God's eyes.

As we reflect on the mourning and sorrow in our lives, we must remember that all sunshine makes a desert and we need the rainy days in our lives to balance us out. We do not enjoy it, but the heart of the wise is indeed in the house of mourning. Remember, the sin that remains in us is because we have yet to truly mourn it. Yes, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," and the mark of God—remember this, it is very interesting—is a mark of deep sorrow and mourning for the world, and for ourselves and the sin that caused Jesus Christ to have to die.

To be blessed, the mourning must lead to godly sorrow and change in our lives. We must use our mourning and sorrow to come before God and allow Him to circumcise our hearts so that we can deeply reflect, repent, change, and grow in godly wisdom. A repentant heart truly mourns, that is, sighs and cries in the world that we live in and our sin that caused the brutal death of our Savior, who lived a perfect life.

We must also, as Moses states, use the pain of loss of our fellow family members to remind us to count our days so that we might gain a heart of godly wisdom, and create a strong sense of urgency to change and finally put those sins that have been hanging onto us behind us forever. We must say it another way: Learn to live each day like we are dying, for one day we will be right.

And we must remember our faithful Redeemer loves us. He came to restore, to heal the brokenhearted. As long as we do not give up on Him, He will not give up on us. When we are beaten down, when we are weak, on the verge, perhaps, of being extinguished, if we return to Him, if we humble ourselves and repent, He will restore us. He will strengthen us with His Holy Spirit to rekindle our flame.

**I Peter 4:1-2** Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.