

The Torment Of The Godly (Part Two)

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," March-April 2010

The life of a prophet of God is, by all accounts, a difficult and burdensome one. God's prophets have had revealed to them both insight into the nation's or world's present state of affairs *and* foresight into future events—and neither of these tend to dwell on uplifting subjects. Most of the time, prophets are forced to think about and warn of sin, societal meltdown, war, captivity, destruction, and death.

So it is that prophets like Jeremiah and Habakkuk complain to God and lament the downfall of their people. Their knowledge of life as it really is—as compared to life as God wants us to live it—makes them sensitive to their societies' frequent slippages toward the brink of catastrophe. Moreover, when they speak of God's displeasure with His people and predict impending divine judgment, the prophets often find themselves the targets of the people's hatred and persecution for pointing out their sins. Many died at the hands of their countrymen.

Realizing the burden of what it means to be a prophet of the true God makes Jonah's flight to Tarshish a bit more understandable!

Yet, in Ezekiel 9, God reveals that the prophets' sobriety and grief over the people's sins and the consequent destruction has His favor. While avenging angels are rampaging through Jerusalem and "utterly slay[ing] old and young men, maidens and little children and women" (Ezekiel 9:5-6), God directs another angel, clothed in linen and having an inkhorn at his side: "Go . . . 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" (verse 4).

God spares those who suffer inner torment due to the rising societal evils around them. Why? What is so significant about sighing and crying over this world's abominable way of life?

Reason Underlies Emotion

Sigh, by way of definition, is *Strong's* #584, and it means "to groan," "to mourn," and "to moan." Its rather interesting first use is found in Exodus 2:23-25:

Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel *groaned* because of their bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Note from the context that our God is a covenant-keeping God. He remembers His covenant and acknowledges those who hear Him and those who sigh among His people. In the Exodus story, He moved to redeem them from their bondage in Egypt, making a distinction between them and their oppressors (Exodus 8:22; 11:7).

Cry is *Strong's* #602 (a fairly rare word, used only four times in Scripture), and it also means "to groan," but it has another meaning as well: "to shriek." This word contains a great deal of emotional meaning. It involves a person's innermost feelings.

Those of a Pentecostal persuasion might tell us that that is the end of it, that sighing and crying is just a lot of whooping and hollering, the outpouring of raw emotion. However, that is not all that it is—not in the least! For us to understand what God requires of us, it is necessary to explain the thinking, the reason, that is behind "sighing and crying." Sound *reason* underlies the emotion expressed by sighing and crying, which needs elaboration before proceeding further.

Neuroscientists used to talk about compartments in the brain. Sometimes in the popular press there is an occasional assertion that one section of the brain is for sight, another one for hearing, another one for mathematical skills, and yet another for artistic skills. The faculty of reason is supposed to reside in the prefrontal cortex, and emotion comes from another area. This idea is called the "localization thesis." It is a simplistic view that has pretty much fallen by the wayside by neuroscientists who have come to know more about how our brains function. One critic of this thesis says:

. . . functions [of the brain], like properties, are distributed (they require a whole system or mechanism to be realized [or actuated]). . . . A danger inherent in the localization thesis may be illuminated by analogy to an internal combustion engine. In describing an engine, one might be tempted to say, "the opening of the intake valve is caused by the movement of the rocker arm." Except that the rocker is, in turn, set in motion by the camshaft, the camshaft by the crankshaft, the crank by a connecting rod, the rod by the piston. But of course, the piston won't move unless the intake valve opens to let the air-fuel mixture in. This logic is finally circular because, really, it is the *entire* mechanism that "causes" the opening of the intake valve; any less holistic view truncates the causal picture and issues in statements that are, at best, partially true. Given that the human brain is more complexly interconnected than a motor by untold orders of magnitude, it is a dubious undertaking to say that any localized organic structure [any section of the brain] is the sufficient cause and exclusive locus of something like "reason" or "emotion." . . .

[For instance] the amygdala is said to be the seat of emotion, the prefrontal cortex of reason. Yet when I get angry, for example, I generally do so for a *reason*; typically I judge myself or another wronged. To cleanly separate emotion from reason-giving makes a hash of human experience. . . . (Matthew B. Crawford, "The Limits of Neuro-Talk," *The New Atlantis*, Number 19, Winter 2008, pp. 65-78)

Emotion and reason are not separate entities. They do not occur in discrete areas of the brain, and it is far better to understand them to be two sides of the same coin. One needs both sides; one cannot have a coin with a single side. It is an impossibility.

Therefore, sighing and crying are not just emotions or feelings. They are not just matters of the heart but also matters of the head. These expressed feelings have reason—thought—firmly attached to them.

Effective Sighing and Crying

With this understanding, let us look at four vital elements to effective sighing and crying before God. These are matters of the mind, matters of reason, which must underlie the very real and necessary emotions of sighing and crying.

One : Obviously, to sigh and cry over the abominations of Israel, *we have to know what sin is and what God considers abominable*. John tells us that "sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). In Romans 3:20, the apostle Paul instructs us that "by the law is the knowledge of sin." In Romans 7:7, he reflects that he "would not have known sin except through the law." So we must know God's law in order to identify sin properly.

This is knowledge, pure and simple, not just emotion. Without this knowledge of the law, we would become subverted by the deceitful rudiments of this world, which are, in reality, demons. Paul writes of this in Colossians 2:8: about demonic philosophies that float around all over this world today, teaching, for instance, that abortion, bestiality, and gluttony are okay because they are simply personal expressions. Liberals here in the United States proclaim that they are acceptable choices! Nevertheless, by knowing God's law, we understand that they are not mere personal expressions and they are not acceptable—they are indeed sins and abominations.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 119:136, "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep your law." The psalmist weeps because he recognizes that people are not obeying God's law, and he can see where it leads: to ruin and death. It is not just emotion but it is real feeling connected with an understanding of God's law.

Two : To sigh and cry effectively over the sins of Israel, *we must know what those sins are*. In this particular context, this means that we need to be watching and listening attentively, just as Peter says that Lot was tormented by what he saw and heard going on around him (II Peter 2:6-8). Lot had to spend at least some of his time listening to SNN, the Sodom News Network!

We cannot sigh and cry if we are like ostriches and bury our heads in the sand. This is a type of denial. We need to be awake and aware, not slumbering and not sleeping (I Thessalonians 5:6). We need to ensure that we interpret the events that we see and hear in the news in terms of God's law, for that holy law is the standard, the benchmark, the touchstone, by which we must measure the deeds of our leadership, of our fellow citizens, and of ourselves.

Of course, awareness of sin does not imply participation in it. In one sense, we need to be like the man in the Bee Gees song, "I Started a Joke," which contains a line: "I started to cry which started the whole world laughing." The song is about an individual out of step with the world around him. He was alienated from it. We, too, are fish out of water—odd men out, as it were—and we cannot sigh and cry over the nation's sins if we are singing from the world's song sheet. To change the metaphor, we cannot march in step with this world and simultaneously sigh and cry at its sins. That simply will not work.

So, while we are *in* the world, we are not *of* it. We are spectators and not participants. Though we are watching from the sidelines, we dare not even for a moment cheer the ways of a world that is oblivious to God's law—a world that almost ubiquitously considers the law to be both odious and onerous. It is a world that is eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage (Matthew 24:38), laughing and living it up while we are crying all the time. We cannot successfully sigh and cry before God if we are of this world, part and parcel of its sins. We must remain outside.

Have we ever considered where our commitment to God's law puts us? Liberals in the world see God as having no influence at all on their actions. They think God has gone away—they even say He is dead—so they believe that obedience to God is not important. In Ezekiel 8, that is exactly what God says is wrong with the leadership of ancient Judah! They, too, thought that God had left the scene.

But what about the conservatives? These people give lip service to the Ten Commandments. They even become exercised when the liberals remove them from courthouses. Yet, consider that, for the most part, they refuse to keep those same commandments themselves! At best, their argument with liberals over this particular issue is logically inconsistent and morally hypocritical because they do not practice what they preach. Their refusal to keep the Sabbath is a prime example. Further, some of the business practices of professing conservatives are appalling, breaking God's injunctions against lying and stealing! Not recognizing the need to keep God's law, most conservatives attend churches that preach heavy doses of salvation by grace through faith alone, saying that is all we need.

This puts true Christians right in the middle—caught between "right" and "left" on every side—trapped in a world of lawlessness on every side. There is no light in this world whatsoever. Though Paul speaks in Romans 2:14 of people "who . . . by nature do the things in the law," he does not say that they *obey* the law but merely practice things contained in it. We, however, are the only people who, by covenant, have committed ourselves to obey God's law. We are indeed odd men out who sigh and cry while the world laughs. And all that time, God remembers His covenant and acknowledges His people.

Successful Weeping and Lamenting

Three : In order to sigh and cry successfully, *we must believe God*. This is vital! In this context, it means that we need to believe how He defines sin. For instance, we must never come to think that "weeping for Tammuz" (Ezekiel 8:13-14) is really not all that bad. God calls it an abomination! If He calls it that, that is exactly what it is, and we need to accept His definition.

To use a more contemporary example, many "good" folk in the world observe Christmas, sincerely believing that they are worshipping God. They will actually say, "This is how *I* worship God," but we understand that how *they* worship God does not amount to a hill of beans! Only God can define how we are to worship Him, and it is for us to follow Him and act accordingly. We need, then, not just to know the law, but also to believe that it defines sin for all time.

Some people can see sin right before their eyes, they can hear it around them, they can live amidst it, but they can never sigh and cry over it because they refuse to allow God's law to be the standard of their behavior. History is replete with examples of this, but we will look only at one. Who of the Jewish leadership—except for Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and perhaps a few others—sighed and cried over the perpetration of an illegal trial that resulted in Christ's death?

In John 16:20, where He is speaking to His disciples on the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice." The world, rejecting God's standards, rejoices at injustice and sin. Human nature can and does rationalize large-scale sin and social injustice, such as the Holocaust, sin that fills the land with vast violence. It can simply rationalize such atrocities on racial, economic, and religious grounds.

We in God's church must come to avoid partiality, mentioned in Leviticus 19:15, as we interpret the news and the social injustices that we see around us. After all, God did not ask Ezekiel to identify

Israel's sins in his tour of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8. God identified the sin for him, even when it was committed in secret. God calls out the sins in His Word, defining the abominations in His law, and we need to know those laws and believe that they are indeed sin. And we need to cry and sigh.

Four : Effective sighing and crying before God *does not imply an "I told you so," self-righteous attitude*. Lot, Peter writes, was oppressed by what he witnessed around him; he wrestled with it. There is no indication at all that he self-righteously gloated at the cities' destruction.

What about Ezekiel? Understandably stunned by the destruction that he witnessed in the visions, he cried out to God, asking Him how far the judgment would go (Ezekiel 9:8; 11:13). Far from self-righteous gloating, this forward-looking prophet expressed his concern over the welfare of his countrymen. His was not a self-righteous response to the destruction that he saw coming.

Because Ezekiel asked, we know. God tells us that He does indeed spare and protect His people (see Ezekiel 11:14-21). We know that God will not destroy all Israel, but He will rescue a remnant out of which He will build a better world for our children's children. It will be a world where, as Amos 5:24 foretells, "justice [will] run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." In that world, we will no longer need to cry and sigh over abominations.

But that will be then, and now is now. In this present evil world, let us sigh and cry over Israel's sins, praying that we use God's Word to understand exactly what those sins are. Let us remain awake and alert to what is happening around us, fully understanding what God considers to be sinful, but not participating at all in those sins. And let us not gloat in self-righteous glee in the wholesale death and destruction that we know will come, but rather pray for God's mercy and grace on all.

The days are becoming very evil, and the angel with the inkhorn might just be roaming around here now. If we do these things, he might not pass us by.