

## “Abuse and God’s Tears for Sufferers” | Hebrews 4:14-5:10

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When you listen to stories of victims of abuse, sometimes all you can do is weep. Especially when they involve a child or youth. You think of the wounds inflicted, the years stolen, and you just want to cry.

Today is our second message on the painful topic of abuse. Last week we saw the close relationship between abuse and power—that abuse involves the manipulation of power, where the strong take advantage of the vulnerable. We considered *Abuse and God’s Word to Those in Power*.

This week we focus on the victim, the wound of the abused.

Along with the misuse of power, abuse can involve a violation of sacred trust. This is the case when abuse comes from a family member, teacher, coach, or pastor. When the context of sacred trust becomes the tool of abuse, the wounds inflicted are devastating. As one counselor has put it, “abuse is a wound of the heart.”<sup>1</sup>

Today I want to ask how such wounds of the heart are healed.

Healing from abuse is a long process, and often benefits from the help of counselors and a safe community. We won’t offer an exhaustive treatment of healing today, but rather focus on one feature of it: the relationship between God’s heart and the healing of wounded hearts. I hope to help us see that *because abuse is a wound of the heart, it is healed by an encounter with another heart, namely, God’s heart*. In short, *Our heart, healed by his heart*.

The battered heart of the victim must be gently restored by the affections that flow from the heart of God—compassion, love, tenderness, sympathy.

Consider an analogy. If you go to the hospital with a broken leg and are placed under anesthesia for surgery, your surgeon’s feelings toward you are not an essential part of your mending. The surgeon must handle the scalpel skillfully, apply sutures carefully, and set the cast properly. But in all these things, your experience of the surgeon’s heart toward you is not essential to your mending—you’re not even conscious!

But what if it is not a broken leg you have, but a broken heart, or shattered soul? And you go to your dear friend for mending. In this case, their affections toward you—the feelings that pour forth from their heart—are essential to your mending. Empathy and tenderness are to the friend what the scalpel and sutures are to the surgeon—they are the tools by which we heal.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Philip Monroe

Sometimes this takes the form of simply weeping with the one who is hurt. And at times, this is what God does with the wounded—he weeps with them. Consider the remarkable story of Elenore, recounted in the book *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse*.

Elenore experienced horrible, chronic childhood abuse, and her progress in counseling had been very slow.... [H]er abuse had created some of the most intense shame and self-loathing her therapist had ever witnessed. In counseling, Elenore was challenged to specifically ask God to communicate to her. She did so, and a few nights later she had a dramatic dream that proved to be the turning point in her healing. She recorded her experience as follows:

It was three o'clock in the morning, and I was wide-awake, thinking about all the things that had happened to me. My thoughts were interrupted by what I can only describe as a vision of God. God with outstretched arms was beckoning me to come to him. At first, I was hesitant, feeling inadequate and insignificant. But as God called out to me, my heart melted, and I finally surrendered. I was irresistibly pulled toward God—I ran toward him. God ... embraced me.

I could not see God's face, but he kept embracing me, holding me, and I felt the warmth of God's love and his compassion. I found myself crying—crying for the first time, and asking God's forgiveness for being so angry with him, for doubting him, and for keeping him out of my life. God just continued to embrace me; he did not let go of me. Amazingly to me, God started to cry. God was crying with me. His tears were huge, and as they fell on me, they soothed and comforted me. The tears spoke volumes, but most of all they healed.<sup>2</sup>

Here, then, is the feature of healing we will consider today: *how do the tears of God's heart heal the wounds of the broken heart?*

Do you know that during Jesus' ministry with us he was, at times, reduced to weeping? In his role as high priest, the writer of Hebrews says that

Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. (Heb 5:7).

Jesus' ministry aimed at reconciling us with God, and at times this reduced him to weeping. When we look at the Gospels, we can see three such occasions. Our Lord wept over the tomb of his friend Lazarus, over the rebellious city of Jerusalem, and over the sorrows of Calvary. Considering these three scenes of weeping, we will consider three types of His tears: the **(1) Tears of a Friend**, **(2) Tears of Prophet**, and **(3) Tears of a Forgiver**.

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<sup>2</sup> Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: 2005) 165-166.

## I. Tears of a Friend

The first time we see Jesus' weeping is at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11. Jesus was close with Lazarus' family, a close friend with his sisters Mary and Martha, and when he arrives at their home he is met by a wave of sorrow. Mary falls at his feet: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11:32). The passage goes on:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. <sup>34</sup> And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." <sup>35</sup> **Jesus wept.** <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" (Jn 11:33-35).

What do these tears reveal about Jesus' heart? How do they soothe the wounded heart?

In a word, I would suggest empathy. Empathy is the ability to feel another person's feelings. It is more than an abstract, distant compassion. Empathy is an up close, visceral connection with another's pain. This is a unique feature of the incarnation—when Jesus' took on flesh, he became experienced in human suffering. The writer of Hebrews stresses this:

Jesus' experience of our pain produces mercy: "He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God... (Heb 2:17).

Jesus' experience of our pain produces sympathy: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus' experience of our pain produces gentleness: "He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness" (Heb 5:2).

Jesus is, as Isaiah foretold, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3). He experienced rejection by family and friends, the pull of temptation, the pain of crucifixion, and even the psychological torment of feeling abandoned by God (Mark 3:21; Jn 19:15-18; Luke 23:24; Matt 27:6).

Jesus weeps over the tomb of Lazarus, because Jesus feels the pain of human loss, viscerally. He weeps as a beloved friend would—with empathy. How might such tears bring healing to our suffering hearts?

**Comfort:** First, Jesus' empathy is comforting, because it means he understands. If you are a student struggling to keep up in class because of relational strife at home, and you have two teachers you could confide in about it, both equally kind and wise, but one of them has been through a similar experience, who do you go to? You seek out the one who has experience with your pain. Why? Because shared experience elicits comfort. Jesus weeps, because he gets it.

**Closeness:** Second, Jesus' tears of empathy suggest that in our pain, he draws close to us. We tend to equate Jesus' closeness with how well our lives are going: if we are healthy, job going well, relationships flourishing, this must be a sign of God's blessing and presence. But actually, the Bible often says the opposite—God draws near to us in our pain. Just as a mother is drawn close to her most hurting child, so too, Jesus is pulled towards us in our pain. It pulls on the cords of mercy in his heart. If you are suffering, the God who can sympathize with your weakness, who has himself been beset with pain, draws close to you.

But tears of sympathy and empathy are the only type of tears Jesus sheds—and they are not the only type of tears we need. We turn now to the second seen of Jesus' weeping.

## II. Tears of a Prophet

The next time Jesus' weeps is over the city of Jerusalem. He's arrived for the final week of his ministry. Many of the people there loved his miracles and teaching. But they will now resist his Lordship—they are more spiritually sick than they know. So, Jesus looks over the spiritually blind city, and weeps:

When he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it,<sup>42</sup> saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Luke 19:41-44).

What type of tears are these? These are not the empathetic tears of a friend. These are the earnest tears of a prophet.

In the scriptures, prophets weep not so much over the immediate emotional state of people, but over their deeper spiritual condition. A prophet is gifted with vision—they see deeper into us and further into our future than we do. What makes them sad is our lack of true closeness with God, or our eternal trajectory.

Jesus' prophetic tears are crucial for us to appreciate today.

They mean that Jesus cares for our true well-being, not just our immediate emotional welfare. Notice that Jesus is looking at an oppressed city when he looks at Jerusalem. They are under the oppressive control of Rome. We might imagine that Jesus would weep over this oppression. But he doesn't. Instead, he sees through it to a spiritual oppression: the people don't know what will make for true peace (Lk 19:42)—they need to be cleansed from their sin and reconciled with God. They don't know that they have, and will, suffer a far greater trauma because of their dislocation from God.

Our culture excels in tears of empathy. We are getting very good at noticing the trauma and pain in others, identifying with it, and weeping with them. But empathy driven only by temporal vision can be deadly. It can lead a person to a false and truncated peace.

I recently read an article about **Bessel van der Kolk**, the most famous living psychiatrist and leader in understanding trauma.<sup>3</sup> He's the author the best-selling book, *The Body Keeps the Score*. The article described a weeklong healing workshop he puts on. The attendees are put in small groups, do breathing exercises, sit in circles for affirmation, and even practice starting into each other's eyes. I imagine that there is good that comes out of this.

But I must be honest. I found this vision of healing so disappointing. The horizon for well-being never stretched past individual's immediate experience of emotional tranquility. There was no real vision for true well-being—for reconciliation with God, for an eternal trajectory toward true life.

Tears of empathy are a gift. But they must be balanced by the tears of a prophet. When Jesus draws close to you in your suffering, he weeps in your pain, and he also weeps—with agonizing longing—over your true well-being. Be comforted by this.

There is yet one more scene where Jesus is tear-filled: His passion. And this takes us to our third point—the tears of forgiveness.

### III. Tears of a Forgiver

During the night before his crucifixion, and from the cross, Jesus' emotions are squeezed to the breaking point. In the Garden of Gethsemane, where he kneels and prays, he tells his disciples that his sorrow is death-like:

My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”<sup>39</sup> And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will (Matt. 26:36).

His sweet turns to blood:

And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:44).

Then from the cross, as he is dying, Jesus cries aloud: “Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘My God my God, what have you forsaken me?’” (Matt 27:46).

What do these cries and tears reveal about his heart? How do they apply to the sufferer today?

We could say much about Jesus' tears here: they mark the pain of one taking on the sins of the world; they mark the agony of the sin-bearer as he feels God-forsakenness. But one way to think of these tears, is as the tears of forgiveness. These are the tears Jesus' cries as he works forgiveness for us. I want to apply these to the sufferer.

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<sup>3</sup><https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/trauma-bessel-van-der-kolk-the-body-keeps-the-score-profile.html>

We must be careful when speaking about forgiveness in the context of abuse. When someone has been hurt this deeply, the idea of forgiveness, explained poorly, can be damaging. One secular treatment of healing from abuse goes so far as to forbid it:

Never say or imply that the client should forgive the abuser. Forgiveness is not essential for healing.... If you hold the belief survivors must forgive the abuser in order to heal, you should not be working with survivors.<sup>4</sup>

We can imagine cases where to speak of forgiveness does almost seem cruel. But the fact remains, that Jesus' tears during his passion are tears that cry out for forgiveness—and this is not an add-on to Christianity, but its center. Part of the healing of the abused, will involve a slow process of forgiving. But let me say what this does not mean:

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation—it is not a call to be in relationship with an unsafe person. Forgiveness does not mean overlooking offenses of the abuser, or staying in an unhealthy relationship. Forgiveness does not mean you suddenly trust the abuser, or that your mind is purged of all memories of what they've done. And human forgiveness is not at the judicial level—God deals with that on the cross.

Here is what it entails, and why Jesus' tears make it possible.

First, biblical forgiveness means letting go of your right to permanently hate the person who harmed you, and seek revenge upon them. And you can do this, only when you see Jesus' tears on the cross. Because these tears are tears of agony, of Jesus bearing judgement for sin. These tears tell us that God will judge your abuser's sin—either on Jesus, or on the perpetrator in hell, where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:42). Only when you know that God will take care of ultimate judgement, can you let go of your right for it. At the foot of the cross, therefore, you can lay down your hate and anger.

Second, biblical forgiveness means you are willing to extend mercy toward those who hurt you. Again, this seems impossible, until you look at Jesus. There, weeping in Gethsemane and crying out on the cross, God extends mercy to those who abuse his own son. Hence the biblical admonition: “be merciful, as your father in heaven is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

Jesus' tears on calvary tell us that God deals with sin justly; they also tell us that God extends mercy to those who have done us harm. It is only when we sense these tears of Christ, that we can be rescued not only from the pain of abuse, but from the prison of bitterness and hate.

[Sum] We all have different personalities. Not everyone is a crier. But our Lord wept. Sometimes, in our pain, that is what we need—for Jesus to draw near to us and weep as a friend, as a prophet, as a forgiver. And in his tears comes our healing.

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 348. Cited in Steven Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, 182.

In one of the earliest and most psychologically insightful Christian autobiographies, Augustine's *Confessions*, the church father speaks of the wound that is inside of him:

I carried about me a cut and bleeding soul, that could not bear to be carried by me, and where I could put it, I could not discover. Not in pleasant groves, not in games and singing, nor in the fragrant corners of a garden. Not in the company of a dinner-table.... not even in my books and poetry. It floundered in a void, and fell back upon me. I remained a haunted spot, which gave me no rest, from which I could escape. For where could my heart flee from my heart?<sup>5</sup>

Where did Augustine finally find healing? Not in mere intellectual assent to Christianity. But in an encounter with the heart of God. Augustine will go on in his *Confessions* to speak of his Lord with the moving title, *God of my heart*.<sup>6</sup>

Healing from wounds of abuse—or any deep wounds—is not a simple or fast process. But it just may be that this wound becomes the place where you meet the heart of God. Your heart, healed by his heart. Your tears, bathed in his tears. May it be so.

### **Small Group Questions.**

Our church is going through a painful but important season. The abuse by past employee who worked on staff from 1990-2002 has come into the light. You can access the report about this, and my letter about it, on our homepage. The church is currently in the process of analyzing all of our policies regarding child protection and how we educate around this.

Take some time as a small group to talk about this. Here are some suggestions.

1. As a small group, pray for the victims of this abuse. They are adults in their 30s and 40s today. Pray that God would release them from shame, pain, and any harm this has done to their relationship with God.
2. Pray for our church community, that God would keep us together during this time, and that we could be a place of grace and truth.
3. Ask how people are feeling about all this. It may bring up all types of emotions: anger, fear, sorrow. It may be impacting people who have experienced abuse themselves. This can be a private area of life, so don't force anyone to share about abuse if they don't want to.
4. In light of this sermon, "Abuse and God's Tears for the Sufferer," consider a few ways that Jesus' tears apply to pain in your own life, or in the life of a friend.

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, IV, vii, 12; see also Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> *Deus cordis mei*, Augustine, *Confessions*, VI, i, 1.

This is a preaching draft.

5. Lastly, consider the relationship between the “tears of empathy” (point one above) and “the tears of a prophet” (point two above). How do you see these tears at work in our culture. Do we have the right balance?

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