

MOURN WELL

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, February 11, 2017

*What a Friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.*

This morning, I want to urge you to learn to mourn well.

This is a season of mourning for our church.

Besides all the tragedy in our world, it has come home to us through the death of two of our friends.

In a world broken by sin, there will be (there should be) sorrow. Let's not flee from it, but embrace it, for we cannot experience the fullness of joy (deep joy) if we avoid the fullness of sorrow.

Matthew 5:4

⁴ God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Grieving and mourning are not synonymous (although modern dictionaries suggest they are). Grieving is involuntary sorrow. Everyone experiences that. Mourning is intentional expression of lament (carrying our grief to God), and it is shared with others.

We're not very good at this. We prefer distraction (sublimation).

Why Should We Mourn?

Mourning does not fix anything. In fact, mourning expresses weakness and need.

Signs of mourning, Biblically, include fasting, shaved heads, black clothing, self-cutting, weeping, and wailing. (Is it curious how some of these signs have become customs of our contemporary culture? I wonder what this may suggest?)

Mourning also depletes us emotionally (Isaiah 33:9): *The land of Israel wilts in mourning.*

However, mourning makes time for reflection, and with that comes the recognition of the value of the soul and the spiritual life (our connection with God, our Creator).

At the very time we should draw near, we tend to isolate. Yet, our sorrow is cut in half if we share it with others.

How Should We Mourn?

Judaism traditionally recognizes three periods of mourning: Shiva (7 days), Shloshim (30 days), and the first year (especially for a parent).

The goal of a shiva caller (your goal, as a comforter) is not to get the mourner to talk; it is simply to comfort them. Your presence alone is doing that. By not avoiding them, by sitting there silently, you are saying more than words can. You are saying: "I am here for you. I feel your pain. There are no words."

And sometimes there really aren't. Here are examples of things not to say:

- "How are you?" (They're not so good.)
- "I know how you feel." (No you don't. Each person feels a unique loss.)
- "At least she lived a long life." (Longer would have been better.)
- "It's good that you have other children," or, "Don't worry, you'll have more." (The loss of a child, no matter what age, is completely devastating.)
- "Cheer up – in a few months you'll meet someone new." (He/she has just lost the other half of their soul!)
- "Let's talk about happy things." (Maybe later.)

Comforting a mourner does not mean distracting a mourner. Don't fill in the time talking about happy subjects or inconsequential topics like politics or business. Remember that speaking about the loved one they lost is comforting. It's all right if they cry; they are in mourning. It's all right if you cry. It is all part of the important process of coming to grips with, and sharing, such a loss.

Mourning Comes to an End

Mourning does come to an end (Isaiah 60:20):
Your days of mourning will come to an end.

God turns our mourning into dancing. Isaiah 35:10 and 51:11 both express the same exultation:

¹⁰ *Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness.*

Isaiah 61:3

³ *To all who mourn in Israel, He will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair.*

Jeremiah 31:13

I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for rejoicing.

Psalms 30:11-12

¹¹ *You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy,* ¹² *that I might sing praises to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give You thanks forever!*

Jesus also expressed this hope (Matthew 5:4):

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Is there a sorrow in your life (a deep wound, a loss, a bitter grief) that you have not intentionally brought to God in mourning? Wouldn't today be a good day to bring it before Him at last and receive His comfort?

Perhaps you could bring His comfort to someone else who is struggling with grief. All you need to do is stand with them or sit beside them. Words are not as important as your presence. Would you help them carry their grief to God in mourning?