

Breathe: Prayers of the Heart
#1: “Exhale: Praying Our Tears”
Psalm 126
July 5, 2009
New City Church of Los Angeles
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I. Introduction

Happy Fourth of July!

We are kicking off a three-part series called Breathe: Prayers of the Heart.

Prayers are often compared to breathing because it is so essential to life with God. I want to use the analogy of breathing to talk about what prayer is about. Today, we’re going to kickoff the series by talking about “Exhaling: Praying Our Tears.”

I know many of you are going through a difficult time in your life. You are feeling sadness, grief, pain, and tears. Some of you are feeling lonely and depressed. Some of you are feeling lost. Some of you are feeling angry and maybe numb because you have been angry for so long. It doesn’t matter whether you are a Christian or not, all of us have a lot of emotions in our hearts. What do we do with all the sorrow, grief, pain, and tears in our lives? How do we handle our emotions?

- A lot of religious people say that we need to repress our emotions. Stuff it. It’s not important. There is a tendency to under-estimate the importance of our emotional life. It doesn’t matter how you feel. It’s about what you do. Just stuff your feelings. To feel angry or sad is almost translated as having no faith. Some of us grew up like this.
- However, a lot of secular people say we need to express our emotions as if emotion is the most important thing, an end in itself. In some ways, they are over-awed by emotion.
- What does the Bible say? We will see that it tells us to (1) expect ups and downs emotions—to expect tears, (2) pray our emotions—to pray our tears; and (3) why we can pray our true emotion.

II. First, the Bible tells us to expect tears.

Let’s look at Psalm 126

1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion,
we were like men who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

(We don't know exactly what the Psalmist is talking about. But, once they were captives, then they were freed. It was like a dream. They were laughing, singing, people were praising God, and they were filled with joy. Have you gone through something like that?)

- I remember after I became a Christian, I was so filled with joy. I was laughing, and literally singing as I biked to school. I'd be listening to my walkman (someone like Keith Green and Amy Grant (I know I am dating myself—and dancing with my bike)
- I remember the evening right after Grace agreed to marry me (it was over the phone because she was in Minnesota and I was in LA). Right after my conversation with her, I went to our small group meeting. Bill Fowler was there in my small group. I was so excited. I was so filled with joy. I was singing. It was great to share that moment with my small group. They rejoiced with me.
- There are times in our lives when we are totally up: totally excited about God, about our family, about our life. God is good.
- But, things can change quickly. Situations can change and our emotions can change. Let's go on:

4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,

will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him.

Commentators talk about how sudden the shift is. They were so happy. Things were going well, and then, suddenly, things turn.

- They feel like they are in the Negev, which was the most arid desert of the region.
- They are filled with tears and weeping.
- Isn't this so true in our lives? Things are going well, we're up emotionally, then suddenly, things go wrong. And we are an emotional wreck. We feel like we are in a desert. We are filled with tears and weeping. Our hearts are in pain. We are hurt. Maybe it's a broken relationship. Losing a job. You get a bad review in your job. You don't pass that exam. Maybe someone in your family gets sick.

Christians have this myth: if I am a good Christian, God's not going to let anything bad happen to me. In this passage, there is no word of repentance here. They are not saying that it's because of sin that their lives are like a desert. So, this means that Christians are wrong. **We should expect tears.**

- Think about it: Ezekiel 36:26 says:

26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove
from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
- When we become a Christian, we are given a new heart, a soft heart. Our heart of stone is removed and a heart of flesh is given. And when we experience life with this soft heart, you feel so much more than you used to. You feel the evil and pain around you that you just didn't feel before. You used to just disdain people who got in your way. Now, there's something in your heart that feels something more. There are all kinds of reasons that as you grow more as a Christian, you feel more and you weep more.
- There was this person who had a perfect heart—Jesus-- and the Bible tells us that he was a man of sorrow and familiar with suffering. Jesus cried many times. When he saw the city of Jerusalem, when he approached Lazarus's house, when he was praying in Gethsemane.

- So, you can see that it doesn't make much sense that on the one hand, we say, "God, I will follow you," but at the same time, believe that if we follow God, God is not going to let anything bad happen to us. Jesus was walking pretty well with God, but I don't think you can say that nothing bad happened to him. God doesn't always take away the storm but He helps us go through it.
- If you don't accept this: you will be crying about two things. About the thing that makes you cry and crying about the fact that you're crying. You're going to sink under the weight of that. So, expect tears.

III. Second, this Psalm goes on and teaches us not only to expect tears but to sow our tears.

5 Those who sow in tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with him.

This is a beautiful poetic image: The image of planting or sowing our tears.

- If we have tears (if we have suffering, discouragements, pains, or sorrow) and just sit on them, there's no harvest.
- If we dump our tears (if we go around dumping our emotion, our baggage, our tears on other people), we don't have a harvest either.

We have to plant our tears.

- If we plant our tears, tears will produce joy. It's not just that someday, God will take away the tears (although he will), but the tears itself when sown will produce joy. There is a kind of joy we get by avoiding tears, but there is a kind of joy that comes through tears. This is a deeper kind of joy. Do you want that kind of joy?
- How do we plant our tears to produce that kind of joy?

We pray them. We pray our tears.

- That's what transforms the weepers.

That's what so much of the Psalms are about.

- When we think of the Bible, we think of it as the word of God. What God says to us. But, there is one book that is more about what we say to God. It is a book of prayers. The Psalms are our prayer book. This is the way that the book has been used for centuries before Jesus, this is the way that Jesus used the book, and this is the way that the church has used the book.
- What does this prayer book teach us about prayer?
- It invites us to pray our anger to God; it invites us to pray our anguish to God; it invites us to pray our thanksgiving and praise to God; it invites us to pray our disappointments and our tears to God; it invites us to pray all of our emotions to God—raw, as they are, messed up, pre-organized, pre-reflective, as we are. That's why so many of the Psalms bother us so much. They are raw, emotionally charged, and completely open and authentic prayers. They say things that our head think we should not say, but our hearts are crying out to say.
- That's the prayer of the heart.

Let me give you an example: Psalm 39: This is a Psalm about the strength of God's disciplines and the momentary nature and frailty of human beings. Almost all of the Psalms of Lament (which are the majority of the Psalms) end with a praise, a note of hope or trust. The Psalmist might be complaining to God—How long O Lord? Where are you O Lord? Why have you forsaken me O Lord?—but he almost always ends on a note of trust in God. But, in Psalm 39, he doesn't follow that structure.

- He says in Psalm 39:12-13:

12 "Hear my prayer, O LORD,
listen to my cry for help;
be not deaf to my weeping.
For I dwell with you as an alien,
a stranger, as all my fathers were.

13 Look away from me, that I may rejoice again
before I depart and am no more."

- This Psalm ends in absolute theological incorrectness. He is saying look away from me, turn your face away from me that I might have a little peace before I

die. It ends with such overwhelming feelings that he actually says exactly the opposite of what he should say. He's lost it.

- What is it mean that this is in the Bible? Why is this here?
- Derrick Kidner, a commentator, said something that really helped me: "This prayer ... makes no more sense than Peter's "Depart from me," (when he realized who Jesus was and how sinful he was) ; but God knows when to treat that plea as in Luke 5:8 (where Peter said depart from me but does not leave) and in Matthew 8:34 (where the towns people ask Jesus to leave after he heals a person possessed with legions of demons and he actually leaves). The very presence of such prayer is a witness to his understanding. He knows how we speak when they are desperate."
- God understands how we say desperate things. He understands how we say the wrong things sometimes. But, he is saying: "it is safe to pray out your deep thoughts to me." **Where your tears belong is not managed and packaged in some confessional prayer; they belong in a pre-reflective outburst from the very depth of your being in the presence of God.** God says: look at Psalm 39: this isn't the way you are supposed to feel but I want you to speak and feel in my presence. I want you to understand that I know what it's like to be desperate.

Eugene Peterson in his book, *Answering God*, talks about three levels of languages:

- Language I is the language of personal intimacy and relationship. It is the first language that we learn. It is the language between a baby and the mother. At first, it's just coos, cries, gruntings, screams, gurgles, out-of-tune hums, little dadas, momas, but it is more than adequate to express complex and profound love and trust.
- Language II is the language of information. We learn words for things and we begin to communicate information. Language II is the major language used in schools.
- Language III is the language of motivation. Language can be used for more than delivering information. It can move, dominate, motivate, and manipulate.
- The languages of our culture are mostly Languages II and III.

- But, Eugene Peterson argues that Language I is the language of the Psalms and the language of prayer. Not exclusively, because it is blended in actual use but mostly. He says: “Languages II and III are no less important in the life of faith but if they are not embedded in Language I they become thin and gaunt . . . Because Languages II and III are more honored in our culture, our habit is to pray in these more easily handled languages. This is fatal to prayer. Informational language is not prayer language. Motivational language is not prayer language. To pray in these languages is, in effect, not to pray. We must let the Psalms train us in prayer language of intimacy, of relationship, of “I and Thou,” and of personal love.”
- If we think our prayers must only be polite and positive and filled with gratitude, and believe that that’s how we are humble and that’s how we are suppose to interact with God, we take God to be satisfied with your form over what is truly in your heart, with a mere shallow relationship with you. He is not. God wants to dialogue with you from your heart. God wants to relate to you at the most intimate level, not just the forced positive level you think God wants from you.

I remember when I first started to date Grace in law school. I didn’t know her that well. I saw her at Christian Legal Society, which was a bible study for law students. But, I was very attracted to her. My roommate and I strategized for hours to figure out the most natural way to ask her out. And that plan worked. I ended up having lunch with her without making her feel like it was a date. I was trying to present the best of myself to her. I don’t think I was confident enough to present who I really was to her. But, from the beginning of our relationship, we connected at a fairly raw level.

- The next real date was about a year later. Again, she and I connected at a very deep level very quickly. We ended up talking until the café closed up and kicked us out. She was struggling over something and she shared the details of the struggle and I listened to her and I started to open up more as well.
- We started to talk to each other in a very real way. That’s why I knew from then on that I wanted to marry her. I saw her as someone I can share my deepest thoughts with and I felt like she would feels safe enough to share her deepest

- That's precisely the point: God wants us to engage him at that raw level. Exhaling the deepest things in our hearts to him and inhaling the deepest part of His heart. Because that's how real love relationship works. God loves you unconditionally. It doesn't matter how dirty your heart is. It doesn't matter what you have done. God loves you and he wants to engage your heart at the deepest level and show you how awesome having a relationship with God is.

IV. Why is God so understanding? Why is it that we can pray like this in front of the most holy God?

Because we have the only God who even claims to have come down and become acquainted with sorrow. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus said: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." He said: "My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet, not as I will, but as you will." He was brutally honest with God. "God, I don't want to go through this if there is another way." God knows what it's like to look to heaven and feel abandoned because he prayed on the cross: "My God My God, Why have you forsaken me?" It is because Jesus was forsaken for our sins that we are given the privilege of entering into this intimate fellowship with God.

- And by the cross, Jesus made it possible for us to be so secure in God that we can approach him without any makeup, without the right posture, without any pretense, just as we are, messed up, theologically incorrect.
- Yet, God understands our tears, he understands our pain, he understands our brokenness, he understands the messiness of our heart.
- And he is saying to us, pray your tears, pray your heart, as it is, raw, pre-reflective, the real authentic you.