

TEARS AMONGST THE TRIUMPH

LUKE 19:41-44

We all know the story of Palm Sunday. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem riding upon a donkey. People are praising His arrival, casting their garments along the pathway of His entrance. Others are waving palm branches. Crowds of people are shouting and singing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” It is a joyful, celebrative scene. And yet, as Jesus looks upon the city from the vantage point of the Mount of Olives, something strange is beginning to take place. Even as He is viewing all of the city’s grandeur, including the magnificent Temple, tears are filling His eyes. At the very moment that the crowds are praising Him, Jesus is weeping—tears amongst the triumph.

Why was He crying? Why was He so distraught? The writer of this Gospel, Luke, provides us with the answer in chapter 19, verses 41-44. Jesus was weeping, in fact, sobbing over the city because He knew three things about this city, its people, and what would transpire in the future. Let’s take a brief look at each of them.

First of all, let’s examine verse 42. Jesus said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.” The people in Jerusalem had no idea of what is required for real peace. They thought if they could just entice Jesus into becoming another King David, then everything would be just fine. In fact, some of them even cried out as He entered the city. “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David.” They were looking for an earthly leader who would throw out the Romans and re-establish an independent Jewish state. The palm branches that they were waving were a vivid portrait of that aspiration. During a brief period, about a hundred and fifty years earlier, when the Jewish people had thrown out the Greeks and were once again ruled by Jewish leaders, the Maccabees had minted new coins. Guess what was inscribed upon some of them—palm branches. Palm branches were miniature declarations of independence. They were symbols for victory and prosperity. That’s why there was such an uproar as Jesus entered the city. Many of those in the crowd thought that they were witnessing the coronation of a new king and the beginning of a new reign of peace free from the tyranny of Rome.

But Jesus was not that kind of a king. He had rejected the possibility of becoming an earthly ruler when He was tempted by the devil at the beginning of His ministry. Remember what Satan said to Jesus? Taking Jesus to a high mountain and showing Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, the evil one promised, “Bow down and worship me and all this I will give to you.” Jesus said, “No!” because He knew that real peace comes from God. He said, “Away from me Satan. For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’”

(Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus wanted to bring about the kind of peace that is not of this world, the kind of peace that is greater than just the cessation of war and violence, the kind of peace that comes when we know that we are secure in the hands of God.

Years ago two pictures were hung in a museum, each with the word "Peace" inscribed below the paintings. The first painting was a pastoral scene with cows grazing beside a quiet brook, with beautiful trees in full foliage scattered across the landscape, a setting sun illuminating the distant mountains. The second painting was far different. A dark sky filled with angry clouds and streaks of lightning filled the canvas, except for one overhanging rock and beneath it sitting on a branch, a little bird with its head gently tucked within its feathers. Jesus was talking about this second kind of peace when He said to His disciples near the end of His ministry, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you, not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

That's the kind of peace that the angels proclaimed at the birth of Christ, when they sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:14). And that's the kind of peace that Jesus was offering to the people of Jerusalem, but as He said, "It was hidden from their eyes." They didn't want the kind of peace that comes from the Lord, the kind of peace that reigns in the hearts of those who have entrusted themselves into the care of God, the kind of peace that endures even in the face of great hardship and pain. They only wanted a more mundane kind of peace, and I wonder if nearly two thousand years later if things have really changed all that much.

Jesus was weeping over the city for another reason as well. Let's take a look at verses 43 and 44. He said, "The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another." That's a rather gruesome picture of the future, and every word of it came to pass in 70 A.D. The Jewish people revolted against Rome and were initially successful. But the full weight of Rome came down upon them. The city of Jerusalem was surrounded by the armies of Rome, the walls were breached, thousands of people were killed, and the city, whose name means "city of peace," was utterly destroyed, including the beautiful Temple. Literally, not one stone was left upon another. Everything that Jesus had said came to pass.

Nearly 40 years before it occurred, Jesus could sense the future of the very people He loved so much. It wasn't just the destruction of a city He saw, but the utter destruction of a nation, cast out from their homeland and scattered abroad for nearly 2000 years. That's what He saw, a people that God so desperately wanted to bless, but who were unwilling to fulfill what the Lord had promised to Abraham so long ago. They could have been a great nation through whom all the peoples on earth would have been blessed. Now that promise would

have to be fulfilled in a different way. In spite of the fact that people from all over the Roman world were turning to the Lord, seeking the one true God of the Jewish people, all of that would be turned into dust and ashes, because they would choose destruction and violence and a bloody revolution instead of serving the Lord. They had turned their backs on God, worshipping Him with their lips but not with their hearts, and there would be a steep price to pay, a very steep price indeed.

Finally, there was one more thing that Jesus perceived as He looked out over the city. The Jewish people would reject Him. Today they were singing His praises. But by the end of the week, they would be shouting, "Crucify him!" His own people would call Him a false prophet, a blasphemer. In their highest court, the Sanhedrin, they would condemn Him to death and demand that the Romans carry out the sentence, administering the cruelest punishment known to man, crucifixion upon a cross. They would fail to realize that He really was the Son of God. Listen again to these words in the second half of verse 44. Speaking, I suspect, almost to Himself, Jesus said, "You did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." The promise of the ages had been fulfilled in this one man seated upon a donkey riding into Jerusalem. Jesus was Immanuel, God with us, in human flesh, God's presence made manifest among men. It had never taken place before and it would not be repeated again. This was a unique event. As Paul stated in his letter to the Corinthians, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (1 Corinthians 5:19).

Now, nearly 2000 years later, I cannot help but wonder if Jesus is not once again weeping as He looks not upon a city but upon an entire nation, the people of America. He is weeping because He knows that we are in danger of doing the same things that the Jewish people did so long ago. We are searching for a superficial peace that does not address the deepest longings of the human heart. We are descending into a maelstrom of national violence which is tearing our nation apart. And finally and most pathetically, we have turned our backs on the only One who can truly save us from ourselves.

Following the tragic events in Florida, all kinds of proposals have been offered to make our schools and indeed our society a safer place in which to live. Some of these proposals have merit and might indeed provide some measure of greater security. But none of them addresses the need for a kind of peace that reigns within the human heart. When I was growing up, for example, there were no metal detectors in the doorways of my school, no armed resource officers patrolling the hallways, no drills on how to respond to an armed intruder. There was no need. That kind of violence in a school was unthinkable. There were overarching moral values based upon the Judaic-Christian understanding of life that precluded that possibility. You just didn't take a gun to school to harm someone.

But many if not most of those moral guidelines have been stripped away, and it's more than just removing the Bible and prayer from our public schools. We have removed them from our lives. Just take a look, for example, of the kinds of shows that are presented on television today and compare them to what was seen in the 1950's and 60's. There are no more little houses on the prairie, unless you watch a re-run. And how about the movie industry? A number of years ago I stopped by the local Blockbuster store to rent a film for the family. I looked around and saw shelf after shelf filled with horror movies. Is it any wonder then that life begins to resemble what we see and hear in the world of entertainment and social media.

And even this is just the tip of the iceberg. We are searching for a superficial peace that will deliver us from harm instead of looking deeply within our hearts and finding the only kind of peace that is real and genuine, a peace that exists within the embrace of a God who truly loves us. That's what a young man by the name of Nicky Cruz discovered a long time ago. He was a gang member in New York City who went into combat with other gangs swinging a baseball bat and wearing a trash can as armor. He would have died on the streets of that city had it not been for a Christian by the name of David Wilkerson, who led him to the Lord and brought peace, genuine peace into his life.

I also think Jesus is weeping for our nation because He sees us heading towards a cataclysm that could simply overwhelm us. Let me ask you several questions. How many of you had home security systems with cameras thirty years ago? How many of you have felt compelled to hire a company to protect your personal identity and financial resources? How many of you think twice about driving through certain sections of the town or community where you live? These and so many other things are indicators of a society that is coming apart at the seams. We can sense it; at least I can, all around us.

And this brings me to the last point. Jesus is weeping because we have rejected Him as the source of our peace. Just recently Billy Graham died. He preached to millions and millions of people all around the world, and his message was quite simple. If you want peace, real peace, turn to Jesus. Confess your sins and ask Him to save you. He is God's Son and our Savior. There is no other way to find peace except through Jesus Christ. In fact, I'm holding a salvation tract in my hand produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Guess what is printed on the cover of this tract, "Steps to Peace with God."

Now more than ever we need to experience a genuine, heartfelt revival all across our land, a spiritual awakening that will bring true peace to our nation and ultimately our world. That's what Benjamin Watson, a professional football player with the Baltimore Ravens has so eloquently proclaimed on national television. I encourage you to Google "Fox News Insider NFL Interview with Benjamin Watson." Hear what he has to say. It's a precious and powerful testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian way of life.

It's also a reminder of the fact that Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ can bring real hope and peace into our world once again. I am reminded of what took place in the southwestern part of Kentucky in the early 1800's. Logan County was a violent and wicked place filled with drunkenness, crime, and abuse. It was variously known as Rogues Harbor, Devil's Den, Outlaws Harbor and Satan's Stronghold. It got so bad that a group of vigilantes decided to take matters into their own hands and clean out this den of iniquity. They lost. Then something marvelous occurred. Revival broke out, led by a Presbyterian pastor named James McGready. Birthed in a year-long prayer emphasis, thousands were marvelously saved. Lives were changed. Schools were built, churches established, and stable communities created where people could live in safety and security. Those who traveled through this region of the state commented on the morality and sobriety of its inhabitants. Society was transformed, not by martial law, not by governmental dictates, not by guns and bullets, but by the power of God. And what transpired there can happen again, right here and right now.

Much has been said recently about making America great again. Whenever I hear these words I am reminded of what a Frenchman said about America in the 1800's. He was named Alexis de Tocqueville. After an extended visit he wrote, "I sought for the key to the greatness and genius of America in her harbors, in her fertile fields and boundless forests, in her rich mines and vast world commerce, in her public school system and institutions of learning. I sought for it in her democratic Congress and in her matchless Constitution. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."