

P.S.

The tear-bottle

THE IMAGE of God collecting tears in a bottle and writing them in His book is perhaps one of the most arresting in the Book of Psalms. These are not any old tears, the tears of someone-or-other, or of mankind at large. These are the tears of His servant David, and, potentially, of you and me. They are precious to the Lord. That is why He treasures them and writes the story of each one.

To know that there is this level of intimate concern for our sufferings on the part of our Lord does not mean that life becomes easy, however. The very psalm which contains the tear-bottle reference, Psalm 56, is heart-rendingly full of just how difficult living a life of faith in the presence of the wicked can be.

And yet the psalm contains an encouraging progression. At the outset David is almost overcome, about to be swallowed up by his enemies, and under siege from their fighting. At the end, the swallowing up by death that seemed virtually inevitable at the beginning has been turned to life. David has been delivered (or has been assured of deliverance), and the darkness, oppression and fighting of the opening stanza has been turned to the light of life. God has led David through a process of liberation, both externally and internally in his heart.

The centre of the psalm (vv. 5-9) helps us with an explanation of how this transformation and deliverance has taken place. David begins by focusing on his enemies and what they are up to. He lists in verses 5 and 6 a series of staccato verbs that describe their activities, most of which seem to be targeted at bringing about his downfall:

- they wrest
- their thoughts are against
- they gather
- they hide
- they mark
- they wait.

The effect of these insistent verbs is to highlight how thoroughly coordinated and directed his enemies are. They know where they are going, their course is set; they are organised and marshalled, ranged against him and bent on success. The worldly in these days are no different. They know what they want, and they know how to get it.

How great the contrast, then, with how David feels about his own path:

“Thou tellest my wanderings:
Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle:
Are they not in Thy book?” (v. 8).

In contrast to their military efficiency and organisation, David seems to be all over the place. He wanders about, dissolving into tears at every turn. Now, while David’s wanderings were a literal fact (where should he hide next?), they may also be read as a parable of discipleship.

This difference between disciple and enemies here seems very telling. Think of the enemies first. The less of a moral and spiritual conscience you have, the easier it is, at a certain level, to be single-minded. If the only goals you have to pursue are fleshly and worldly goals, then it is not too difficult to be marshalled, organised and goal-centred in achieving them. After all, the children of this world are in their generation wiser.

The difficulty of discipleship is the pull between flesh and spirit, the conflict between worldly and Divine goals, the sense of being pulled in two directions at once. This conflict is one which, although they have a conscience of some kind, the worldly do not experience to the same extent. Hence the disciple’s wanderings from time to time, his stuttering indecision, his being unsure of which way to go. Hence the tears of frustration and desperation.

And yet, to realise the nature of this struggle, and the fact that it is indeed taking place and differentiates a disciple from one who is not, is part of the way to addressing the problem. Understanding the lack of direction we sometimes feel, and taking note of the welling tears, can help clarify which way we would rather be going, and where our priorities lie. It also helps us remember that God is with us rather than with them, and that He will come to our aid. There are six expressions that David uses to describe the enemies in the above bulleted sequence, yet the list actually concludes with a seventh, which marks a turning point:

- “Shall they escape by iniquity?” (v. 7).

The wicked may be marshalled and united in sin, but the tears and the wanderings of the righteous are far more precious than anything they will ever achieve. In due time God will recompense, and the priority now is to commit our ways to Him and to cry to Him for deliverance.

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