

Sowing with tears, reaping with joy

"Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (Ps. 126:5)

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

After several leading articles on Israel, Islam and the church, we now present a sermon of Marcel Rebiai's which is meant to encourage and strengthen our personal relationship to Jesus. It was minimally adapted for written form.

In the book of Revelation we read, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4).

We find the same topic in the Old Testament, e.g. Isaiah 25:7-8, "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth."

Have you ever wondered why this topic is so important in God's word, so that both Isaiah and John speak of the day on which God will wipe away all tears? It touched me when I realized once again how much God wants to write on our hearts that a day will come when all tears will be wiped away - and HE himself will do it! This means of course that God is well aware of tears.

Tears are unavoidable

Tears are an unavoidable reality, otherwise it would not be written that he will wipe away every tear. Not from those who weep, but from every face. Tears are a reality. Obviously we enter God's kingdom and presence with tears. But what does that mean? This is not what we expect. After all, who wants to get into situations which drive him to tears? This is not the life and future we are yearning for.

We would prefer to be without tears now. Everything the world undertakes is intended to eliminate tears as far as possible. The goal is fun, ease, recreation - no tension, no stress. But this is incompatible with tears. Of course, some people's eyes stream with tears when they laugh. I hardly believe God wants to wipe away these tears. Sometimes we also shed tears when we yawn, but these are not relevant here, either.

Before looking at a Psalm to take us deeper into this topic, it is important to realize that it is an unbelievable promise that the day will come when God will wipe away all tears. What a future, that God himself will wipe away the tears from each one of us! In other words, there will come a day of final and absolute comfort. When our tears are wiped away we are comforted. God says, "The moment is coming in which you will experience comfort in its fulness." We need comfort because tears are an unavoidable reality.

...like men who dreamed

Psalm 126 speaks of those who come home, literally Israel returning to its land, but also the church returning home to God's presence. "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. 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.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes,

O Lord, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seeds to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him."

This Psalm shows us that there is a home-coming. The moment will come when we all return home. We are all waiting for this moment, longing for the day we finally arrive at the father's home. We can't imagine how this will feel! The Psalmist attempts to describe it. It is simply a dream, i.e. something we actually cannot imagine. "Our mouths were filled with laughter" means that our whole being is full of laughter. Suddenly everything inside us relaxes and breaks open when we are at home. We will no longer have to make an effort to worship God because our whole being will break out in praise.

After the Psalmist realizes this, he looks back and says of the path which leads to this home, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." These are tears which are sown. Scattering seed, going out, and sowing obviously have to do with tears' reality. Why? If sowing drives us to tears, that means it is strenuous, costs us a lot, takes energy out of us, and makes us sad. We weep from grief and helplessness because we are stretched to our limits. And when we reach our limits and sense that there is no more we can do, tears come.

God lets us reach our limits

Obviously God does not protect us from tears in this life. He does not protect us from being stretched to our limits, from mourning, from experiencing our helplessness, does not protect us from getting into situations where we can do nothing but weep. Otherwise we would not read about tears. When we are following and serving Jesus, we often have the feeling that he should prepare a nice level path for us and remove every pebble. Then the enemy comes and says, "Is that a path of life which leads to limitations, which is filled with tears, helplessness, suffering and perseverance?"

We know where these tears come from; this is nothing theoretical. We are taxed to our own limits. The better we know ourselves, the more we realize how limited and narrow our heart is. The more we have the courage to see the extent of our need, the more we begin to suffer over ourselves. This can drive us to tears, to our extremities, to helplessness. We intended something quite different, but we realize that it wasn't so easy. There is a deep chasm between what is in my head and what is really in my heart. Recognizing this can drive us to tears and to cry, "Lord, help!"

When Paul experienced this he wrote, "What a wretched man I am! "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). He suddenly saw what was really inside him and he lost every illusion about himself. Therefore he cried out, "What a wretched man I am!" Paul, such a gifted man, with so many achievements, ended by saying, "What a wretched man I am!" This is the cry of one who has reached his demarcation line. Paul weeps over himself because he has seen who he really is.

But there is another kind of weeping, as well; namely, when we daily reach our perimeter in our relationships to one another, to say nothing of those to whom we bring the Gospel. We would like everything to be smooth and relaxed. We are constantly looking for a method which would make this possible, where there are no sharp edges and no offences. And then we realize that there is no such method. At this moment we reach our limitations.

We reach our limits over and over again. If someone says he has never done so, I have my doubts as to whether he is really spreading the Gospel and has ever encountered sin in his own life and in others. God not only doesn't protect us from reaching our own boundaries, he even says, "When your experiences drive you to tears and you want to give up because it's so difficult, that's the best condition for sowing." How do we sow? We sow with the promise that there will be a joyful harvest. God does not want me to give up or shrink back. He wants me to begin sowing hope exactly at the point where I suffer over myself and where my inner

narrowness is so obvious that it hurts me; where I have the feeling that no one can help me; where I say with Paul, "I'm the last. I'm miserable! There's no help for me." This is exactly where Jesus expects us to sow hope and his word.

Biblical models

What made the great men of the Bible into the models they are? For example, what made Abraham into the man he is? - He is called a friend of God and father of those who believe. If anyone was ever driven to tears, then it was Abraham. He had to take his own son and walk three days to the place designated by God. There he was to sacrifice this son, the joy of his life; his own son, whom he had longed for all his life. Isaac had embodied his future and his experience of God. I can imagine that Abraham died a thousand deaths. If anyone has been driven to tears, then he was! In such a situation, every one of us would have said, "That's it. God can't ask any more of me. Now it's enough." It would have been understandable if Abraham had reacted in this way. And in the midst of this, Isaac asked his father, "Where is the lamb?"

When we are in overwhelming situations we often experience the same thing. Everyone can see that something is not right. And now this difficult question. Abraham's answer? No excuses, nor simply, "I don't know." Rather, in this moment Abraham sows a seed which will later bear fruit in the lives of Isaac and the whole people of Israel. For he says, "God will take care of it." Abraham didn't understand what was happening and he had no answer. But one thing he knew, "In this situation, which I don't understand, which is so unbearably painful, which brings me to the end of my abilities, I know one thing: God is here. He will take care of it He will provide a lamb." Into this difficult situation Abraham sowed trust and hope.

Now let's look at Moses. Moses was deeply disappointed by the people after he had invested everything in them and they had seen miracle after miracle. But as soon as he was absent for a few days, the people fell into deepest idolatry. Moses was shattered. Every one of us would have been. Moreover, even God comes and says, "I understand you. Come, we'll stop trying with this people and I'll start over again with you!" Which one of us would not have said yes or would not have been honored that God wanted to begin a new generation with me!

Moses became a friend of God because at this point of deepest disappointment, where he experienced his own confines, he did not choose the easiest path, but said, "No, Lord, for your sake. For your sake I won't give up. For your sake I'll continue with this people. What would people think of you?" Moses' awe of God was more important to him than his own disappointment. "Lord, I don't want others to think evil of you and dishonor your name."

Sowing trust and hope

The men of God who bore fruit in his kingdom and set so much in motion are people who God brought to their limits, to the point of tears. But in the midst of these limits and difficulties, they sowed trust and hope. They sowed with David's words, "And yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. If I only have you..." (Psalm 73:23).

We usually can't see the connection between tears and limits on the one hand and God's special presence on the other. But this is just the point. We are all on the way home, and it is a reality that on this path these two aspects belong together. Whoever does not sow God's kingdom in the tears he sheds will not be able to reap. "They go out weeping, carrying seeds to sow."

When we reach our limitations, God doesn't hold it against us that we weep and struggle. But he says, "Keep going, trust me; sow hope, sow trust; give me the honor; trust me that I will reach the goal with you; trust me that I will fulfill what I have planned; don't run

away from this situation or start looking for your own solutions!" If we seek our own solutions we will reap only our own fruit. God says, "If you sow trust in me, I will let you reap my fruit. And this fruit will be joy." As we read in the Psalm, "They will reap with songs of joy. They return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

"Yet I am always with you."

I want to encourage you in two things. First, we should not be dismayed and think something unusual is happening, or that God is infinitely distant when we reach our own cut-off point and are driven to tears. And second, we should not begin complaining, but realize that he is with us in the midst of everything. God waits for us to begin sowing and say, "Yet I am always with you. No matter what you allow, I know that you are good. I know that you will break open my boundaries. You will lead me out into a wide place. It is written, 'He brought me out into a spacious place' (Psalm 18:19). I know that you will do it. I know that you will turn my inner desert into a blossoming garden. I won't give up, no matter how many rocks I have to clear away. Lord, I won't give up because I know that after all the tears and struggles you will do what you said, namely wipe away all these tears. And then 'with joy they bring their sheaves, in joy they harvest.'"

What do we reap? We reap the experience of God's unspeakable presence. Is there anything more wonderful than standing in front of the father and hearing him, say, "Now all suffering is at an end." Finished. All problems, all struggles are over. This awaits us. Even if it sounds like a dream, and even the Psalm says it is like a dream - it is still God's reality. He says, "I will lead you into this reality, if you are determined." And our answer will be, "Lord, it may cost me tears but I will continue to approach you. I will not allow myself to be held up. Even if I don't understand and can't put everything together, I know you are good. For if you weren't good, all life would be meaningless. If God weren't faithful, everything would be hopeless. So I say, Lord, it is you. You are faithful, and I will experience it. And I'll keep going until it is tangible in my life."

Laughter which will fill our whole being

Thank God that we do not have to wait for this comfort until we see him face to face. God is so endlessly merciful that he gives us a taste of his comfort even now. But this taste cannot be compared, is not even a glimmer of what God has ready for us. It is not just a sentimental wish, but God's reality. If we set our sights on this comfort and reaffirm daily, "Lord, I want to attain that", we will know in a new way that our tears are not the sole reality. Joy is God's goal for us. Rejoicing is God's goal for us. The laughter which will fill our whole being is God's goal for us.

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