

**Bottled Tears**  
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Psalm 56  
Sunday, 9 August 2020

**Please Pray with me:**

Holy God,  
You who feel our pain and our doubt, and cry along with us;  
We ask for your guiding light of life to outshine our sorrows.  
We ask that you help us to overcome fear because you are with  
us. Be with us today, Lord, as we continue to seek your voice  
in the complex beauty of Scripture.

**In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.**

When was the last time you cried? Can you remember what  
caused the tears? Was it from sadness or happiness or anger or  
surprise? I cry at the drop of a hat so keeping track for me is  
a full-time job. In his book, *Yet Will I Trust Him*, John Mark  
Hick's tells the following story about his son, Joshua, who was  
born with a genetic disorder that causes degeneration. He  
writes:

"From the first day Joshua saw a school bus, he wanted  
to ride one. He wanted to be like his older sister. She rode  
the bus, and so would he! Whenever a bus came into view, he  
would shout, 'I wanna ride!' Finally, his day came. Every  
morning I would take him out to wait for the bus at a place near

my office. When he saw it coming, he would jump and scream for joy.

"But one day, for some reason, he did not want to get on. I took him by the hand and gently led him up the steps of the bus, and he got on. But he was hesitant, reluctant, crying. I thought perhaps he was just having a bad day, but as the bus drove away I learned why he was hesitant, and I heard words that tore my heart. It was as if a knife had been stuck into my gut and twisted.

"His schoolmates were ridiculing him. The older children were calling him names. They ridiculed his need for diapers and mocked his use of them the previous day. As the bus drove off, I could hear the mockery, and I could see my son stumble down the aisle as he looked for a seat.

"Anger grew inside me. All morning I wanted to take some of those older kids aside and heap some abuse of my own on them. Let them see how it feels! Let them know what it's like to be hurt, ridiculed, and mocked. Maybe I should talk to the bus driver, or to the school principal, to the teachers, or to the parents! My helplessness increased my frustration. This alternated with waves of deep pain for my son's suffering. What could I do?

"Finally, I took my anger and hurt to God. I went to my office and poured my heart before him. I held nothing back. I complained bitterly, I complained, I cried. Why was my son born with this condition? Why are others permitted to inflict pain upon the innocent? Why hadn't God answered our prayers for a healthy son? Why couldn't Joshua ever fulfill the dreams we had for him and honor the name which we gave him as a leader among God's people?

"Suddenly, in the midst of my tears, it was as if God said to me, 'I understand - they treated my Son that way, too.' In that moment, I felt God crying with me. This changed everything.

"That was many years ago, and over time, I watched how this crying God stayed with my son and walked with him to help him through - in teachers and friends that came alongside him for support, in his own strengths within, and in the deep faith my son has that even I cannot match. God's tears met our tears and have carried us through."

This image of a weeping God, seen throughout scripture is one of comfort. When reading through this lamenting prayer song, I was struck by this imagery of God collecting tears. Verse 8

reads: "You yourself have kept track of my misery. Put my tears into your bottle – aren't they on your scroll already?"

**Today we're going to explore this remarkable image of God collecting our tears for safe-keeping, and how our sorrows are not lost on God.**

This verse makes me imagine an infinitely long storage unit with a never ending supply of shelves all with neatly labeled little vial's that identify whose vial it is. It makes me imagine little marks for the years of the tears so that someone could pick it up and say, "Yeah, 2016 was a tough year for Rachel."

I imagine my tears of pain over losing my mother mixing with the tears of fear over the pandemic, and the tears of stressing over an assignment, and with the tears of uncontrollable laughter. I imagine each drop of those tears revealing the memory that caused them, that idea that these carefully preserved tears hold within them memories that would otherwise become lost in time is rather comforting to me. It makes me feel as though my life has so much value to God.

Now, collecting tears, believe it or not, is actually a very old custom that some cultures still practice to this very day.

A man named Zach Bent spoke to a journalist about his practice of what is called, *Lachrymatory*. He explains:

"Tears fall often in our house. Collecting them in the vial became a similar ritual to kissing a bump on the head. It became an act of love. This is a case where my art practice heightened the quality of our inter-family relationships and made physically manifest our maternal and paternal care giving ... The title *Lachrymatory* comes from the ancient tear catching vials that were often filled by grieving widows. I collect a lot of tears as a father. The piece definitely memorializes mourning and weakness. The result of the collection is salt; an element of preservation."

The widow piece that he is speaking about was of a common practice back in ancient Rome where mourners collected tears to put in a tomb to show their respect. Women could even receive compensation for crying into vials because it was believed that the tears placed in someone's tomb from the mourners was a way of measuring how loved they were.

But this isn't just back in ancient times. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tears were collected by mourners and when they evaporated in the vial, the period of mourning would come to an end. And during the Civil War, the wives of soldiers would

collect their tears while their husbands were off at war to prove how much they missed them. It's only been in the modern age, though, that tears of happiness have been captured.

In the book of the weeping prophet, *Jeremiah*, we see the mourning women who are encouraged to weep and wail to God because God hears us and our tears are cried along with God's own tears. Tears play an essential part in someone's life and in the lives of those around them and should never go to waste.

By God collecting our tears, God makes sure that they have value, that they do not just waste away with time. God redeems our tears and thus, redeems us. It's been said that "The ungodly waste their pain." Pain and sorrow have value and that is never lost on God.

This imagery gives us the okay to express how we're feeling, especially to God, who collects all tears without judgement. The happy tears, the sad tears. The tears of grieving over a loved one and the tears from watching a sappy commercial. The tears are without hierarchy, and play out a story of each person's life.

I once heard a pastor tell the following story:

"a mother sent her little daughter to the corner store to buy some groceries. As the little girl was prone to being

mischievous, when she arrived home much later than she should have, her mother immediately assumed the worst and began to chew her out.

After venting a bit, eventually the mother calmed down enough to ask her daughter what possible excuse she could have for arriving home so late. The little girl answered, "On my way to the store, I ran into my friend and she had just lost her cat." The mother, somewhat taken aback by an almost legitimate excuse, inquired further, 'Oh, so you stopped to help your friend find her cat?' To which the little girl replied, 'No, I just stopped to help her cry.'"

This action of God being an active part of our emotions depends on us trusting God with them and in turn deepens the relationship we have with God. God helps us cry.

Make use of your tears! This Psalmist who is lamenting their oppression offers strong words of redemption, of overcoming fear with God by their side, of recognizing that nothing or no-one has as much power as God has over our lives. No doubt, no fear, no pandemic can tear us from God's love and care. Tears play such an essential role in our human existence, in us sympathizing and empathizing, of us revealing the inner-

most depths of our character and it carries with it the absolute worst and the absolute best of human nature.

It has been said that "Tears are liquid prayer." God's preservation of this watery salt, truly valuing us as this "salt of the earth", our lives and emotions and memories are given value. This can help us look past the wrongs that others inflict on us, overcome our fears of loved ones getting sick, and see the redeeming and ever-present nature of the Lord.

"In God, whose word I praise,  
in the Lord, whose word I praise,  
in God I trust; I am not afraid.

What can a mere mortal do to me?"

I am not afraid to just pass through life, for what I experience and what I love to disappear with time. The Lord keeps it all safe as though protecting gold. The Lord's love for us, redeems us.

Because God values our tears, we should value one another's tears. Author Palmer Chinchin offers this reflection:

"The Hebrew people have a special way of coming together to help people deal with pain, loss, and grief. They call it shiva (which means seven, or sits of seven). When there is a death, the closest family members come together. They come together and

sit. But they don't sit alone: all their friends and family come and sit with them. They sit until the healing begins. They sit because they want you to know you're not alone in your sorrow.

"They sit together for seven days, and here's what I love about the seventh day: On the seventh day everyone in the community comes, and they walk with the family around the block. The subtle message is, You can begin to live again. We know you hurt, and we hurt with you, but you can heal over. Life goes on. Step forth to it. Don't let this pain rule you. Refuse it's demand upon you."

God counts our tears. Everything we experience from the life-altering to the trivial are kept in safe-keeping with God. Nothing is lost, nothing evaporates. Because of this, we are challenged to go forth and value in high regard the tears we see all around us every day. Our lives and our memories and our emotions live on through the merciful nature of the Lord. When we live that out, valuing the lives around us, giving dignity and respect and courtesy, we can do just as the Psalmist does, and walk "in the light of life" with God.

So when was the last time you cried? Did you think it was gone and past as soon as your cheeks dried? Find hope in the Lord's safe-keeping.