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The God Who Weeps

DISCOVER THE LOVE AND COMPASSION
OF JESUS CHRIST

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

THE GOD WHO WEEPS

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OF JESUS CHRIST

The *Book of Knowledge* states that man is the only animal born completely helpless; we cannot survive without outside help. The only thing we can do by ourselves is cry—that's all. So, the most natural and human feature of mankind is tears. Winston Churchill offered this now famous line, given to Great Britain after the miserable defeat at Dunkirk, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat," reminds us that these things are common to and identify mankind.

But tears are usually associated with weakness and frailty. Unfortunately, they're often attributed to women. I recall a summer Bible school we conducted many years ago at the church where I was pastoring. My study overlooked the playground. I noted at the beginning of school a small boy who brought his little sister. Apparently, he had been instructed to take good care of her, because he hovered over her. Then I heard a little one crying. When I opened the window to look out, I saw this little girl had fallen as they ran for the bus. She had skinned her knees on the

asphalt and was letting the world know about it. As she cried, her brother was there, wiping away her tears and giving her a pep talk about not crying. In a disgusted tone he said, “Only *girls* cry!” Well, she stopped crying immediately and ran with him to the bus. Tears, even for that little fellow, were associated with girls.

Women have a reputation for shedding tears, but tears are also manly. In fact, many men made famous for their strength have wept. Alexander the Great wept when there was no more world to conquer. Xerxes stood on the banks of the Aegean Sea and wept when he saw his great fleet destroyed by a storm. Napoleon, being taken away for his first exile and the coastline of France, stood there and wept as the land he loved disappeared from his view. The apostle Paul, a man who was apparently not very emotional, is recorded to have wept. And it’s said that Abraham Lincoln, a strong man and a strong president, wept unashamedly during the Civil War when he read the casualty lists.

Tears are manly, tears are womanly, tears are human. They’re the mark of mankind.

Not only are tears human, tears are also godly. It was a profound revelation for the ancient world—actually for both Jew and Gentile—to learn there are tears in God’s eyes. The pagan world never ascribed two characteristics to their deities. They never work (it was beneath them). It was remarkable when the Lord Jesus could say, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17).

They also never show emotion. The Spartans were trained to be like the gods on Olympus, so they were stoic. No young man dared show any emotion whatever if he wanted to be like the gods.

The Bible tells us that God has been in tears. May I say to you, that’s a thought to ponder—our God in tears! Scripture says God laughs; Scripture also says God weeps. The Gospel writers record three times in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ when He wept, and those tears reveal the heart of God. It’s indeed

startling! God in tears? Yes, but these tears are eloquent—as Abraham Cowley put it, “Words that weep, and tears that speak.” The tears of the Lord Jesus speak, my beloved, so let’s look at these three occasions in His ministry when He wept.

TEARS OF SYMPATHY

The first incident is illustrated in the briefest verse in the Bible, and I'm confident almost everyone knows it. It's so familiar that it may have lost its impact. But may I say to you that it is a somber, solemn verse—a wonderful verse:

Jesus wept. –John 11:35

It happened on the way to the grave of Lazarus. Friends of the family were still there mourning with Lazarus' two sisters, Mary and Martha, who were weeping. When our Lord came into their presence He wept. Jesus *wept*. Our Lord shed tears; they covered His cheeks, and His body shook with emotion.

He knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, nevertheless Jesus wept in sympathy—sympathy for those He loved, because death had intruded into the family circle.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. –Romans 5:12

A person is sitting on a wooden dock, looking out over a calm lake. The lake reflects the surrounding green mountains and the sky. The scene is peaceful and scenic.

The Lord Jesus

TOOK UPON HIMSELF HUMAN FLESH
TO LET YOU AND ME KNOW THAT

God sympathizes.

— DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

Although death is the bitter fruit of sin, it doesn't mean God doesn't sympathize. Jesus' tears reveal how God feels at a funeral. Never has there been a coffin with a lifeless form in it, never has there been an open grave, but there stands an unseen Mourner who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

We sometimes hear it said that Christians ought not to weep over death. But Scripture tells us we *are* to weep; it also tells us *how* we are to weep. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians,

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. –1 Thessalonians 4:13

We are to weep and we are to sorrow, but not as if we have no hope.

The child of God has a blessed hope. We shed tears in view of that hope, knowing someday we will be reunited with our loved ones. May I say to you, God sympathizes at the time of death. The Lord Jesus took upon Himself human flesh to let you and me know that God sympathizes. He shed genuine tears of sympathy to let us know how God feels. I never have stood at an open casket without that thought in mind.

A deacon of my church in Nashville, Tennessee, was a funeral director. He was one of these gentle fellows with a very tender heart. He had known me since I was a boy, but after I became a pastor he called me one morning and said, "Vernon, I want you to do a favor for me. Last night we collected the body of a man in a jail. He was a drifter—no one even knows his name. When they picked him up, he was drunk, and he died in the night. The county pays for the funeral, and there would be nothing in it for you—but I just don't like to bury a fellow this way. I wonder if you'd come down and have a service? Let's bury him the right way."

So, I went that day to the little chapel. The funeral director had placed atop the cheap casket a spray of flowers, probably borrowed from another funeral. Then he came in and sat down, and we had a service. I read the Scripture, said a prayer, and made

a few remarks—it was the hardest funeral I've ever conducted. You know, there was not a person topside of the earth to shed a tear for that nameless man. But I want to say to you, although I didn't see Him, there was standing in the shadows that day our Lord Jesus who, when He was on this earth, went to a grave and wept. He was there in the chapel that day, my beloved, and He wept for that drifter.

May I say to you, God weeps because death is the curse of sin, and when death comes to man it brings tears to the eyes of God. It also means He will come to you and to me in sympathy in that dark hour. No one else may be able to sympathize; no one else may be able to stand with you. I have found that the most difficult time to minister to anyone is when death has come into the family. But there's one thing sure, the Lord Jesus Christ can and will minister to a heart at a time of suffering, because He sympathizes.

The word "sympathize" is made up of two words: *soon*, a Greek preposition meaning "with"; and *pathos* meaning "to suffer." It means He *suffers* with. That's what sympathy is: To suffer with another. It's not to say some nice glib expression or send a little card. Sympathy is when you suffer with another. And I say to you, the tears of Jesus are tears of sympathy.

TEARS OF SORROW

The second incident is found in the Gospel of Luke:

Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it.

–Luke 19:41

The background is actually the so-called Triumphal Entry. Our Lord had already come into Jerusalem on the Sabbath, when no money-changers were there. The record tells us He looked around and then left. He rejected that temple and that city. But the next day, which was a Sunday, He came into Jerusalem again and cleansed the temple.

Years ago, I traveled to the Middle East and for the first time approached Jerusalem, not from the west, but from the east. We had flown down to the capital of the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan and gone to the top of Mount Nebo. Having then visited the Dead Sea area, late in the afternoon we drove up to Jerusalem. It's quite a drive through the wilderness of Judea. We came to little Bethany and then made a turn around the Mount of Olives. It was at that moment Jerusalem first came into view. I must admit, it was a real emotional thrill for me to look down upon that city.

That's where Jesus was when He wept over Jerusalem. He had been in Bethany, spent the night there, and then He came around the hill that Sunday morning. As He did, the city broke into view and Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Isn't it interesting that in the one short-lived hour of His triumph, He wept? Luke's language here is very strong. Literally, it says He *wept*! I think if you had been in the neighborhood, you would have heard Him. He took up a lamentation for Jerusalem. He was heartbroken over the city that would reject and crucify Him. It's no wonder they mistook Him for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was called "the weeping prophet." When God chose a man to deliver the harshest message ever given to a city, He didn't choose a brutal, hard-boiled fellow. He took the man who had a heart as tender as a mother's. The message Jeremiah gave broke even his own heart. At one point he turned in his resignation to the Lord because he felt he could no longer take the emotional and physical strain on his body. But he had to come back to Him and say, "*Your Word was a burning fire within my bones, and I can't keep silent*" (see Jeremiah 20:9). So he came back and continued giving God's harsh message to His people, shedding tears as he spoke.

When the Lord Jesus wept over Jerusalem, there were some who saw Him and said, "*He's Jeremiah!*" Well, He was certainly like Jeremiah in that He had a tender heart, but our Lord was not weeping for Himself. Even on the way out to Golgotha to be crucified, He could turn and say,

"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." –Luke 23:28

Why was He weeping? Because He knew of the severity of judgment that was coming on that city. This time His tears are the tears of sorrow—sorrow because of the agonizing suffering those in Jerusalem would experience at the time of their judgment.



THERE'S
joy in heaven
WHEN ONE TURNS
to God.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

We have only to follow history a few years, to 70 AD, to see why He wept. That is when the tramp of the Roman soldiers, under the command of Titus, was heard outside the walls of Jerusalem, and they utterly destroyed that city. An eyewitness and historian wrote that no city ever suffered the brutality Jerusalem suffered, when even mothers saw their little ones taken by brutal Roman soldiers who dashed out their brains against the rocks nearby. Men and women died inside that city, and children were eaten by their own parents. It was horrible! It was judgment upon a city that had rejected its Savior and King.

No wonder Jesus wept over that city, knowing as He did the judgment that was coming upon them. Oh, my friend, Jesus shed His blood to make your salvation possible. He sheds His tears when you reject Him. He was “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isaiah 53:3). And may I say to you, people are still doing that!

This doesn't mean He is burdened down with grief. The next verse says, “Surely He has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows...” He didn't have any of His own, but He was carrying the sorrows and the griefs of the world upon His heart. He knows today the awful doom of a lost soul. Right now the world would like to forget it, but we can't forget it, my beloved, because the Word of God is explicit here:

The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God. –Psalm 9:17

Oh, you can say that's an awful doctrine in this civilized age! But it's too bad some of these murderers today don't know about it. It might deter our escalating crime rate to know we all have to face up to God Himself at the last. The wicked will be *lost*, my beloved. God is not a “softy” just because He sheds tears. He weeps because it's not His will that any should perish, but that all might come to a knowledge of the truth.

I want you to notice three verses of Scripture that need to be emphasized in our contemporary culture. They were given to a prophet who spoke to a people who would not listen—very much like the generation we have today. These verses contain two great truths:

1. The wicked are *lost* unless they come to Christ.
2. It will break God's heart if they do not come to Him.

You cannot escape this twofold truth.

God Himself says,

“Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?” says the Lord God, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?” –Ezekiel 18:23

Can you hear the heart of God there? He goes on:

“For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!” –Ezekiel 18:32

There's joy in heaven when one turns to God! There's weeping in heaven when one doesn't turn. Now notice this:

Say to them: “As I live,” says the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?” –Ezekiel 33:11

It was a great grief to the Lord Jesus when His people had to be judged. His were tears of sorrow when He wept over Jerusalem.

May I say, He still sheds tears of sorrow. They are tears of sorrow over men and women who reject Him. He shed His blood to make your salvation possible, and He sheds tears when you reject that salvation. He weeps because it is not His will that any should perish. Oh, how wonderful He is!

TEARS OF SUFFERING

Now, the third and last incident:

Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear. –Hebrews 5:7

I want you to notice this verse and the connection in which it's used. It's actually not at the cross. Rather it's referring to the prayer our Lord uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this prayer he not only prayed, but He also cried. It pierced the night air like the cry of a wounded animal.

The question arises, why did He pray in the garden as He did? Especially, why did He say, "*Let this cup pass*" (see Matthew 26:39)? Good expositors differ on their explanations, but there are three popular views. One is that He prayed to be delivered from premature death, fearing He would not make it to the cross. The second is that He prayed because of fear of death. And the third explanation is that it was because He would be separated from the Father. I don't mean to discount any one of these, and yet I don't think any of these three are adequate.

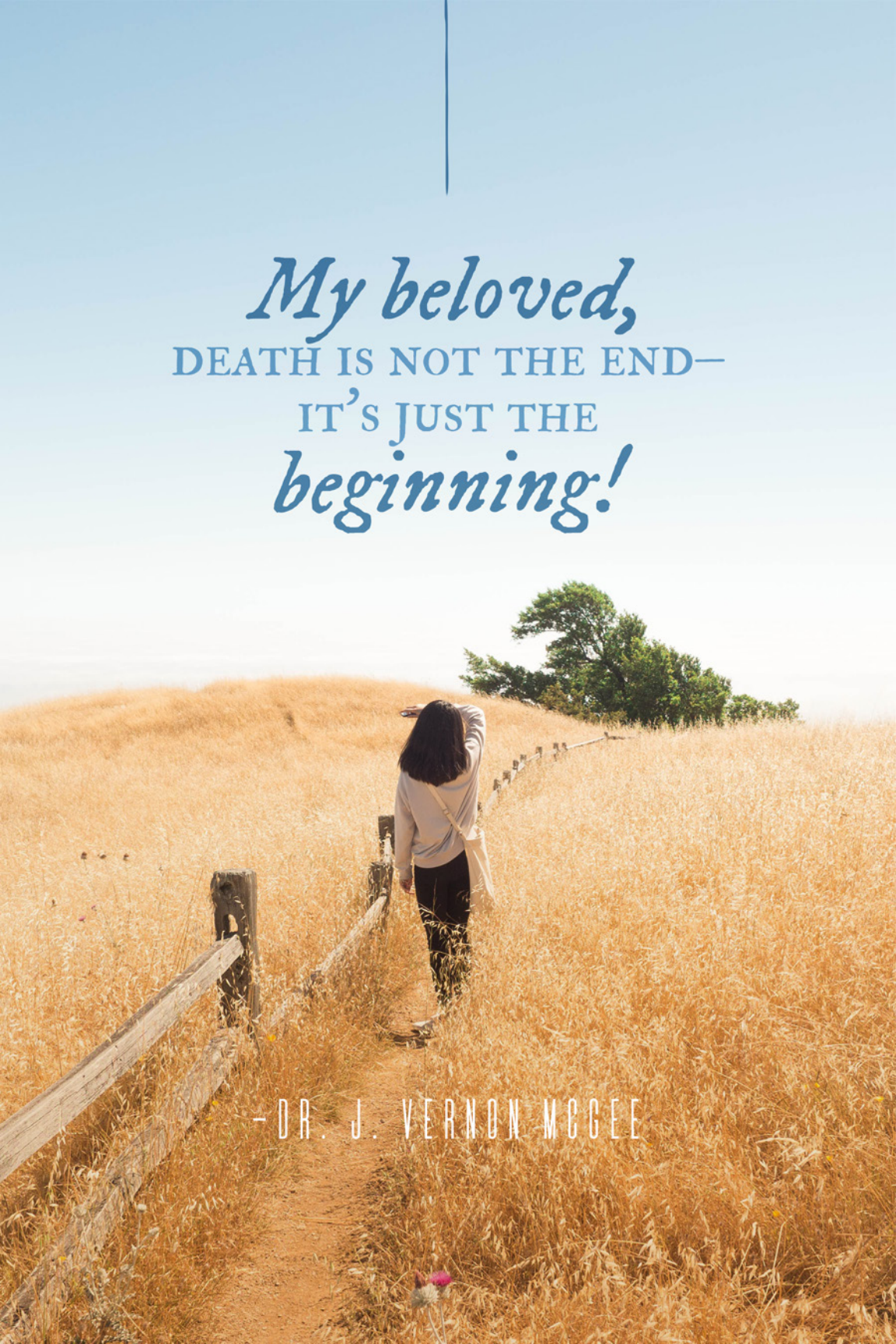
Notice the verse very carefully again:

Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear.

Jesus was heard. If He prayed to be delivered from death, then that prayer was not answered, because He died; but it says He was heard. Notice what the writer is actually saying here: Jesus prayed to be saved *out* of death, that is, by resurrection. He's looking beyond His death to resurrection morning! I don't think He had any fear of death whatsoever, because death would not be the victor. That's the very thing Simon Peter said on the Day of Pentecost, that our Lord did not leave His soul in hades, and that His body did not see corruption. Later on Paul could say, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55, KJV).

The prayer of our Lord in the garden was answered—He was raised out of death. On that cross He who knew no sin was made sin for us. "It pleased the LORD to bruise Him..." (Isaiah 53:10), and He dealt with His beloved Son as He must deal with every sinner who stands before Him on his own merits. Jesus prayed that He might be delivered out of death and all that death means.

Unfortunately, in the present hour most people are not afraid to die—nor have they been. The pagan world actually teaches that it's a fine thing to die. Many lost people today are not afraid of death. They're not afraid to die. May I say to you, the liberal has told them God is dead, that there is no afterlife, that death ends it all, and that the grave is the final resting-place. Therefore, when life becomes intolerable down here, multitudes of people choose death, thinking it is the end. My beloved, death is not the end—it's just the beginning!

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, is walking away from the camera on a dirt path. The path is flanked by a wooden fence on the left and tall, golden-brown grass on both sides. In the distance, there are several green trees under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is bright and peaceful.

My beloved,
DEATH IS NOT THE END—
IT'S JUST THE
beginning!

— DR. J. VERNON MCCREE

A man with that mindset came to my home in Nashville. It was summertime and I was sitting out on the front porch studying when this fellow came up the steps. He wasn't dressed very well, and he pulled out the rustiest gun I'd ever seen. He said, "If you don't give me some reason to live, I'm going to kill myself."

I said to him, "I don't know what your problem is, and I don't even know what to say to you. But I will say this, if you prove to me that death ends it all, I'll go and get you a better gun than the one you've got there and let you do a good job of it."

He put down the gun and asked, "What do you mean?"

I said, "I mean simply this, my friend. You're just getting out of the frying pan and into the fire. You're not solving anything. If you think leaving this life means you're solving something, you are solving nothing. In fact, you're complicating your situation. God put you here to make a decision. He gave you a free will, and He asks you to exercise that."

In Romans 3:18 Paul wrote, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." That's true today. People don't mind dying, and if the grave ends it all then they've been smart. But, my friend, if the grave does not end it all, they're the biggest fools the world has ever seen.

The death the Lord Jesus endured was not an ordinary death. It's a mystery none of us will ever be able to penetrate. On the day of Jesus' crucifixion God placed a mantle of darkness over that cross for three hours, so no one can describe the sufferings of Christ when He was made sin for you and for me. It's as if the Holy Spirit pulled down a veil and said, "*This is too horrid; this is too terrible. You cannot look inside.*" So our feeble attempts to picture it are a travesty. His sufferings on the cross are not described anywhere in the Bible.

Only this can be said: There were tears and there was blood. They are silent but eloquent symbols of how God feels. They are real and genuine. His tears were not make-believe tears; His blood was real blood!

Our problem today is that we are afraid to face up to reality. That's the reason liquor, drug abuse, and even television are so popular. Someone wrote that the ostrich-like habit of burying one's thinking in the sands of the past makes for mental comfort. It most certainly doesn't make for realism, which involves facing and accepting the facts. Very few will face up to reality. Years ago in England, Margaret Fuller, a writer with a great mind, stated, "I accept the Universe!" And when someone told Thomas Carlyle what she said, he replied, "Well, she'd better!"

My friend, you'd better accept the facts. You'd better deal with reality—not play church or play at life. A great many people come to church not to be moved but to be entertained. They do not come to be shaken—they are already shaky in their faith.

Someone has said that we proclaim today a "balcony" Christianity—it's aimed at the onlooker, the spectator, the nonparticipating person. We traffic in unfelt truth. We handle treasures as if they were trifles. We announce the good news as if it were a rumor. We talk about facts as though they were fiction. We claim an experience and we offer a performance. We erect great, expensive, launching pads and new churches, and then a little firecracker is fired from the pulpit instead of a mighty missile empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But I offer you something real: The tears and blood of Christ. Both were shed for you. Blood for your redemption and tears if you reject Him. There is nothing sentimental about God's tears—they are neither emotional nor effeminate. Oh, if we could only get away from this cheap sentiment. But today there are those who say you've got to shed tears to be saved—tears of repentance.

Repentance is not shedding tears. Repentance (*metanoia* in Greek) means a change of mind. It means to be going one direction, then turning around and going in the opposite direction. If turning to God and away from sin produces tears, well and good, but just be sure, my beloved, that you turn around!

My dad used to tell about a boat on the Mississippi River that had a little-bitty boiler and a great big whistle. When that boat was going upstream and the whistle was blown, it stopped moving forward and started drifting with the current. The whistle was too big for the boiler to make any progress. Now, a lot of people today have a little boiler and a big whistle—that is, they will shed tears, but they're not going anywhere. They don't even turn around. They just drift.

I do believe we need a baptism of genuine emotion in the church. We'll go to a movie and weep tears over it—because she didn't get her man or he didn't get what was coming to him. May I say to you, my beloved, a block of ice is weepy also. We can shed tears in church and still be cold toward God. My beloved, if you shed tears, make sure you have turned to the Lord Jesus Himself.

This isn't only my opinion. As a young man working as a sportswriter for the newspaper, I came to know Ralph McGill, who became an outstanding writer of the South and was brought to prominence for espousing civil rights. He sent a letter to me about the church:

We, as a church, have failed to communicate effectively the Christian message to the present generation, and this generation needs it so desperately. I say this because I have found that the educated man today is the anxious man. He has a sickening realization of his own insecurities, inadequacies, defenses, and aggressions. He has soberly discovered that all men are not inherently good, just, and honest, nor does right always prevail. He's disturbed because the old standards of conduct and control no longer seem adequate. He's beginning to see that all of our meager remedial efforts have failed to stop the inexorable drift of society.

He goes on to say that the message in the pulpit of our churches has been watered down. Dr. Stanley High, who was a very prominent journalist and also a Christian, wrote in *Time Magazine* some time ago that he was fed-up with the “pink-tea” type of church that has no solid message and no saving ministry.

My beloved, we need to get involved today. Tears are the badge of Christ’s suffering. They are genuine. They speak of His deep pain. They tell of His redemptive death and the blood He shed to redeem you. Those tears He shed when He was here on earth were shed for you and me.

*The Son of God in tears,
The wondering angels see.
Be thou astonished, O my soul,
He shed those tears for thee.*

–Author unknown

He died to save us; He sheds tears when we reject Him.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. –John 15:13

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners [ungodly, without strength], Christ died for us.
–Romans 5:8


You can stand on the sidelines today, unmoved and untouched. You can even keep Him from saving you. But you cannot keep Him from weeping over you.

God loves you and gave His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you. It’s so beautiful, it should make us weep.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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