

Title: Tears Are Liquid Prayers

Text: Revelation 7:9-17

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Several years ago, I narrowly escaped a severe car accident. In the rush of adrenaline that followed, I pulled over to the side of the road in a parking lot to recover. I remember the intense shaking and release of the moment that tears began to flow down my face as I thought about what I had just experienced and how close I came to my life being forever altered. I was riding the razor's edge of life, and in that moment, I realized how life can turn on a dime. Isn't that true for a lot of life? One moment, we are headed down the road without a care in the world, and in a few seconds later life is forever changed.

I want to tell you about another life-can-turn-on-a-dime moment. A couple of years ago, a friend introduced me to a fascinating book called *America's Great Storm: Leading Through Hurricane Katrina*. The book was written by Hailey Barbour, former Governor of Mississippi. The content was intriguing and showed a massive difference in how Mississippi guided the state through the political landmines and landmarks after Katrina that hit the Gulf region of the US. Although it was hit just as hard, Mississippi's response was very different than Louisiana. In Barbour's book, I remembered how the peoples' lives were affected by the hurricane storm's damaging winds and flooding water. I recalled the chaos left behind for hundreds of thousands of residents in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. In just a few days of storm waters and winds, the rich joined the homeless, and people struggled to find the basics: shelter, food, and clean water.

After the first few weeks, a new norm was established, and other needs began to appear. How about clean clothes? I remember how diapers ran low, and socks saturated by the water and mud began to stink. I remember how the rest of the clothes worn were stiff due to being unwashed. We like our clean clothes. We do like to be clean.

I remember reading of Tide detergent sending a semi outfitted with energy efficient washers and dryers. They dubbed it "Loads of Hope" to help clean up the situation. In "Loads of Hope" a new laundromat was able to handle up to three hundred loads of laundry daily. Katrina refugees were offered a place where their laundry could be washed, dried, and folded. What a great idea!

Friends, it is a gift to be clean. From Katrina's lesson, I remember how those stories impacted my story as I rode out Hurricane's Matthew and Ian. We feel better after having a hot bath and clean clothes. These activities mean order is restored. When we are not clean, our life is out of sync. Our sink stops and the dirty dishes start to accumulate until they take over the kitchen. When the sink is unclogged and the dishes tucked away, order in the house is restored and we feel better. Our attitudes "feel better" when things are clean, fixed, and in their proper place. We need order in our lives.

Recently, we saw the effects of how storms threaten the lives in Texas. The flash flood ripped through multiple camps and RV parks as just another reminder of how our lives can indeed turn on a dime, but accidents or weather is not the only things that can do that. Our lives are sent into chaos when marriages end, our health is compromised with the word "cancer," or a family member dies due to old age. Life events may snowball quickly, and the side-effects leave us wondering, "Where are the helpers? In other words, where are the semis showing up with the "Loads of Hope" washing machines to clean up our smelly lives?"

And into such a chaos, our text reminds us that as we witness in the name of Jesus Christ, things can go and often will go wrong. In John's "Revelation" in Chapter 7, we see in his heavenly vision that pain and suffering will come to even the most faithful who had suffered "tribulations" at the hands of this world. Our faith does not exempt us from struggling.

In John's words, he offers us a different vision of how heaven and earth work together for those who are washed clean in the white robes of "hope." John specifically offers us a disturbing and contrasting image of how we get the white robes. He reports the robes are cleaned, not based upon some wondrous work we do, but through only one wondrous work – the "blood of the Lamb."

Now, think about that statement a moment and feel the contrast. Blood makes our robes (our lives) white! Followers of Jesus are washed and made clean through blood. Specifically, the witness of Jesus' blood washes us clean. That's a powerful contrast, don't you think? We want white and it is red blood that makes us white!

John sees in his vision a multitude of the redeemed whose lives were confronted by chaos and turned on a dime, and these redeemed were those who had gone through the trials, tortures, and tribulations that the powerful in this world dishes out. No wonder there is such great joy in heaven. No wonder there are endless choruses of thanksgiving. God's power and praise gives us hope when things seem out of control and all is lost.

So, into those pain-filled and painful situations, I want us to think of what it means to cry? We hide behind our tears and apologize quickly when others see us cry. We train our sons that "big boys don't cry!" I remember my dad telling me, "Eddie, don't cry! If you don't stop, I'll give you something to cry over." And when someone in our presence does cry, we get nervous over tears. We shuffle our feet and don't know how to respond. We don't want to talk about or to recognize tears as a church. We like to believe that we gather and hold hands and sing Kumbyah, but the fact is some of us gathered this morning, either in this space or online, will be struggling. We will be hurting and throw off balance by life's challenges. Into this mess, John's words remind us that tears are biblical.

So, that is why this sermon's titled "tears are our liquid prayers." While we wish that everything was always rosy in this world, we must address the fact this world has lots of pain in it. Our world is filled with tears, and the tears of the faithful are important for us to remember. Notice that our scriptures are filled with tears. From beginning to end, we read about people crying.

Recall that Hagar wept, Esau wept, Jacob wept, Samson's wife wept, Jonathan and David wept with each other, David wept over Absalom and Jonathan's deaths, Elijah wept, the people of Israel sat down and wept when in Babylon and they remembered Zion, Peter wept bitterly when he denied Jesus, Mary Magdalen wept at his tomb...Peter wept. Paul wept and Timothy wept when he left Paul. Friends, over and over again scripture records lots and lots of tears.

So, what do these "tears of the faithful" reveal? What is the revelation John wishes us to see today? I believe the message is simple but profound. That no matter our station in life, every person here sits next to a pool of tears. Those tears could be our own. They could be our child's. They could be our family's tears. They could be our neighbor's tears. This place... this church... this sanctuary... this "hospital of sinners" is filled with tears. We hide these tears by showing a brave face and believe that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

But, if that is what you think, I remind you that you are wrong. If you think you don't need your tears, scripture is clear. God wishes for us to shed those tears in this place! And let me be bold and tell you – all of you – God wants your tears. Why? Because those tears which from the deep places are our liquid prayers offered to God. They are more precious than diamonds or gold. They are to God's eyes and ears like the widow's mite's offering. Our tears are everything we are to our God who only wants to join with us and our tears. And if we are crying right now, you are not alone. Friends, God's crying right alongside us.

For our tears are like the semi's from Tide and are our "Loads of Hope" washing things clean. One of the greatest miracles about water is that it dissolves problems. Water cleans a whole lot of stuff, especially our souls. The tears of the faithful are our liquid prayers that we recognize every time we baptize someone. Our tears rain down and become the water-works we have operating for us internally. Our tears rain down and flush out our guilt. Our tears rain down and release our fears. Our tears rain down and renew our souls.

Frederick Buechner says tears are our essential guide. Our tears presents for us a pathway for hope. Buechner says:

"Whenever you find tears in your eyes, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next." (Whistling in the Dark. p. 117.)

John's vision reveals what would not have been possible without the sacrificial love of the Lamb. Jesus was sent not to be like us. No, absolutely not! He was sent to be one of us and experience the torments of this physical world – hunger, thirst, and scorching sun in the wilderness. And remember Jesus cried. He wept over his friend Lazarus' death. He cried for his troubled city Jerusalem. Jesus's tears showed us God didn't abandon him, nor will God abandon us. God sends us Jesus Christ to be there with us. And we are God's hands, God's feet, God's heart, and God's tears offered to the world.

We are "the faithful" and we are gathered here with our tears. God is here and at work through us until we reach the Omega. Until God wipes every tear from our eyes, it is our job and our task to dab the eyes of those who are watering the soil with their tears, especially those who cannot wipe the tears away for themselves. It is our job, our honor, and our privilege to cry with those who are too hungry, too thirsty, too dehydrated to form tears in their eyes. We are like the semi's from Tide offering loads of hope to make things clean.

There is an old Jewish saying: "In the desert of the heart, let the healing fountain start." Wherever in the desert of our heart is this morning, let the healing fountain start. Give God those liquid prayers that run silently from our eyes, and those tears that are so old they no longer have names. Let the Lamb himself wipe those tears away and cloth us in the white robes that are washed clean in the blood of Jesus. To the one who sits upon the throne and to the bleeding lamb be all honor and glory and power and might. Amen.

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes-- who are they, and where did they come from?"

I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every **tear** from their eyes."